



The Only Way Forward is Back

# BACK TRACKER

a novel

MILO JAMES FOWLER

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*For Sara*

*Now and Forever*

# PROLOGUE

*Ten Years Ago: 2166*

April 12

Alan stood at the railing, gripping it with both hands, knuckles as white as the raging waters far below. Plenty of rocks down there beneath the surface, rearing their heads among the chop. They would break his fall. And him.

He tapped the plug behind his left ear and called up the life insurance policy. Documents floated before his ocular implants, a hologram only he could see. Not that anybody else would have noticed if he'd projected it. Nobody was around.

A lonely bridge in the driving rain. A desperate man under an avalanche of debt. But now everything was in order. His family would be provided for. They wouldn't have much, but they would survive. All he had to do was jump.

His boots slipped as he climbed over the railing, clinging to it. He had to do this right. Couldn't foul it up and just break his leg. He had to go face-first, crack open his head like a swollen watermelon.

Strange what you think about at the end. Not the faces of his wife and kids, which would have made more sense. Instead he remembered fresh fruit, something he hadn't tasted since he was a kid himself. Times were different then. Everything seemed more real, somehow. Not like this.

Why wasn't he afraid? He should have been shivering with cold dread. Instead this was more like a Link experience. Virtual. Almost real, only something was missing. It didn't feel like it was actually happening. Maybe

part of him didn't believe he'd go through with it. He was a coward, after all.

His boots shuffled on the slick ledge. He was stalling. His grip on the railing behind him had yet to loosen. He couldn't feel his fingers.

"This is it," he breathed, psyching himself up.

He pulled his right hand free.

"Need some help?" called a voice from the end of the bridge.

Alan jerked his head, facing the voice. A dark figure approached, trench coat flailing in the wind and rain. A purposeful gait, unhurried. An unfamiliar man. An unexpected obstacle.

"No thanks," Alan said, unprepared for conversation, hoping this stranger wasn't some good-doing Wayist here to save his soul. "I'm fine."

"Unlikely, Alan," said the stranger. "You've been missing for days. The cops have given up on you, but your family hasn't. They're worried. People think you left them."

"No, I—" He struggled to hold onto the railing and face the stranger at the same time. "I would never leave them. I love them."

"They know. They love you. That's why they hired me to find you."

"Hired?" That didn't make sense. They had barely enough credit for groceries. "Who the hell are you?"

"You're in trouble. I get that." The stranger stopped a couple meters away. Both hands stuffed into the deep pockets of his coat. "But doing this? Leaving your wife and kids? You'll only hurt them more."

"They're better off—"

"They don't think so. I'm inclined to agree with them." He beckoned with a nod. "Come on, Alan. Let's go see your family. Trust me, they'll be happy to see you."

Alan turned his gaze back to the water. The rocks. The easy way out. Except it wouldn't be so easy, would it? Not

for his wife, Jean. Or the kids, Hana, Debi, and Ernest. He saw their faces now, and his eyes stung with hot tears. They would miss him terribly.

But he knew what was best. They would learn to live without him, and things would be better for them. No more gambling debts, living in fear of the collectors. Those bloodsuckers would leave his family alone once the life insurance took care of everything he owed. Jean and the kids could start over with a clean slate. Without his addiction poisoning their happiness.

His mind was made up. Not an easy choice, but the only one that mattered.

He stepped off the ledge, both boots dangling in the air, cold rushing upward—

Until his shoulder wrenched free of its socket, his arm extended over his head, his wrist snagged on something that left him swinging. He cried out in pain and surprise.

"No you don't." The stranger had a hold of him, gripping him with both gloved hands. "I'm a man of my word, Alan. I promised your wife I'd bring you home."

"Let me go!" Alan wailed. A pathetic sound. He hated being so weak.

"C'mon." The stranger grunted, adjusting his hold, clutching Alan's forearm. "Help me out here. I don't have all day."

A pinpoint of light flashed from the man's wrist. He wore an outdated timepiece, a black plastic wristwatch, something like a kid might have worn decades ago. Alan hadn't seen anything like it since he was a boy himself, digging for the prize at the bottom of a cereal box.

The stranger cursed under his breath. "We're running out of time, Alan."

"Who are you?"

"Harry Muldoon. Believe it or not, this isn't the first time we've met."

Mystified, Alan reached upward with his other arm, and Muldoon guided his hands to the railing, holding onto him tightly as both his boots regained their footing on the ledge. Muldoon didn't let go until Alan had clambered over to stand beside him on the bridge.

"Hail a cab. Take it to this address." Muldoon handed him a business card, as outdated as the wristwatch. On it was printed a location Alan didn't recognize. "Wait for me there."

A chime sounded on Muldoon's timepiece. Some kind of alarm? The light continued to flash.

"We've got to get you cleaned up before you go home. You've been out on the streets too long. Promise me you'll do as I say this time."

"This time?" Alan echoed. Things were getting weirder by the moment.

"I'll meet you there." He took a step back, beyond Alan's reach, and stood like a statue. The chime reached a fevered pitch. "Don't freak out."

A sudden burst of electric-blue light, and Harry Muldoon vanished from sight, leaving nothing behind. It was as though he'd never been there. In the silence that followed, interrupted only by the sounds of the churning river and driving rain, Alan staggered across the bridge with trembling hands. Every few seconds, he glanced at the address on the card, wondering if it too would disappear without warning.

When Alan eventually showed up at his office, he opened the door with **HAROLD MULDOON, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR** in bold lettering on the frosted glass.

"You made it." He graced Alan with half a grin. Then he cold-cocked him, knocking him unconscious with a single blow to the jaw. "Sorry, Alan," he said, catching the disheveled man as he slumped into his arms. "Three days from now, we'll get you home. Until then, you've got to sit tight."

Muldoon dragged Alan to a chair and zip-tied him in place. There were consequences to chronic online gaming. You never knew when you might wake up and find yourself in the clutches of collectors looking to take what you owed them in blood instead of credits. Not the case here, but that was beside the point.

Alan's wife wouldn't be requesting Muldoon's help until two days from now. So Muldoon would have to wait until sometime after that to take him home. If Alan were reunited with his family too soon, then he wouldn't be gone long enough for Jean to visit Muldoon's office, and Muldoon never would go looking for her husband in the first place. As a rule, Muldoon tried to avoid the possibility of such inconsistent causal loops. They gave him headaches.

When Alan came to, he wouldn't ask many questions. He'd be too shocked by the whole experience. Just enough to keep him on the straight and narrow path, Muldoon hoped.

Half a dozen tries, but he'd finally managed to get Alan this far. The cops, overworked and underpaid, had presumed the man was dead after three days missing. They'd been right. But the police had their limits. They couldn't travel into the past and find Alan moments before he threw his life away.

Muldoon was no hero. He had a business to run, rent to pay, and he expected to be compensated for his efforts. Often times he was—when he timed things out right. So he waited. Kept Alan fed and watered, alive and well. Out of sight. Then he arranged the tearful reunion.

As far as the cops and collectors knew, Alan Jeffries was dead. Muldoon would advise the Jeffries to keep it that way. Get the hell out of town and start over in some other Province with new identities. If all went according to plan, they would live out the rest of their lives together, poor but happy. There were worse endings to this story.

Muldoon hoped none of them ever came to pass.





July 31

Raul's shorts and T-shirt were damp with sweat. He sat huddled in a corner of the dark closet, as far from the door as possible. Whenever it opened, he jumped, stifling a scream. He couldn't stop shaking.

They tossed him a candy bar once in a while, a bottle of water. They didn't let him out to go to the bathroom. He had to do that in a corner of the closet. The smell made him sick, even though it was his own.

In the gloom, he couldn't tell what time it was. When the door opened, the glare was always the same—too bright, like the lights in the gym at school. How many days had passed since they grabbed him off the street? Two, maybe?

He'd been walking home after swim practice. The sun was still out. They pulled up in a van and dragged him inside before he could cry for help, before he knew what was really happening. He knew it was wrong, being carried off your feet by two strong men. Tossed onto your back, a gloved hand pressed hard over your mouth while others grabbed your feet and your hands and wrapped them in tape. The side door slid shut with a slam, plunging the back of the van into darkness.

"Well, ain't he pretty," said one of them as the van lurched from the curb with a screech of tires, accelerating away. "Catch of the day, huh?"

Another one chuckled, cursing with appreciation. "Top dollar, my man, top dollar."

They talked about him like he was something to be bought or sold. They told him not to cry and spoil his pretty little face.

"Five thousand for our little man, nothing less," they said, winking at him.

Raul's stomach rumbled now. Had they fed him today? It had been a while since his last candy bar and water bottle.

They didn't sound happy outside, in that other room with the gym lights. They yelled at each other, cursing and calling each other awful names, hollering about "buyers" and "markets" and "merchandise." Raul crept toward the door to hear better.

"So much for your contacts," spat one of them. "Days now, and we've got nothing. Meanwhile our fresh little flower is wilting. Top dollar, my ass!"

"Lay off, man," said the other one. "They'll be here. Just wait."

"What have we been doing? An easy score, you said. Right. We'll be lucky to break even! That van, this hellhole—you said we'd come out ahead, but we're worse off than when we started!"

"Trust me. It'll pay off."

"Cut and run, man. We've gotta burn everything, erase the DNA. That kid's gonna croak before we get a single credit out of this mess, and I'm not going down with the ship."

The door crashed open. Not the closet door—another one, slamming against the wall like somebody had kicked it in. Raul cringed but kept his ear pressed against the closet door, listening intently. The men shouted and cursed, surprised. Gun metal clicked and clinked, but before a single shot could go off, the sound of pulse rounds firing filled the room. Just like on the Link, those "cop shows" as Raul's mother called them: three blasts, abrupt bass notes that rumbled in Raul's chest as they found their marks.

The men released garbled cries, hitting the floor and shaking violently. Raul could see it all happen in his mind's eye, every detail down to the thuds of the men's weapons hitting the floor, released by their limp fingers after the seizures ended. They lay still. Silent. No longer in control of the situation.

Raul heard only his own breath. Maybe his heartbeat too, racing in his ears if that was possible.

"Third time's the charm," muttered a voice Raul didn't recognize as heavy footsteps headed toward the closet. A shadow fell across the line of white light beneath the door. More silence. Then a soft knock. "It's okay, kid. You're all right now." The man paused. "Move back from the door. Let's get you out of there."

Raul crawled backward, bringing up one arm to shield his face. Who was this man with the pulse gun? A cop? They weren't allowed to use lethal rounds, so that made sense. The police had found him, they'd come to rescue him. He would finally go home, something he feared might never happen.

The closet door caved in with broken padlocks swinging from the door jam. Three of them. Those kidnappers hadn't wanted Raul to even think about escaping. Now they lay sprawled out across the floor and stained furniture, either unconscious or dead. Hard to tell which.

"Can you walk?" said the stranger.

He was tall, backlit by the room's glaring light. His gun was in his right hand, pointed at the floor. A revolver with a large cylinder and a wide barrel. The cylinder glowed blue where three rounds remained unfired in their chambers.

Raul nodded and tried to say he could, but his throat was dried shut. So he got to his feet instead and instantly crumpled against the man.

"Steady, champ." The man caught him with one arm and held him upright. "You haven't gotten much exercise lately."

"I swim," Raul managed. Talking hurt his throat.

"You're dehydrated. Want me to carry you out?"

Raul shook his head. He forced his wobbly knees to obey, taking a step back from the man.

"You're one tough kid," the man said. He sounded like he meant it.

They stepped over the zip-tied limbs of the motionless men on the floor and headed toward the busted front doorway.

"You a cop?" Raul rasped as they stepped out into the humid summer night.

The stranger shook his head. "They gave up on finding you a few days ago. Thought you were dead. Maybe worse." He nodded over his shoulder toward the first-floor apartment they were leaving behind, one of maybe a thousand in the block-long HellTown tenement. "Your mom hired me to find you."

"Are you a detective?"

A smile cracked one side of the stranger's face.

"Sometimes."

"What's your name?"

"Muldoon. You?"

"Raul."

Muldoon stuck out his hand. Raul took it in a firm shake.

"Would you believe we've met before, Raul?"

He frowned at that, trying to remember. "I don't think so..."

"Another life." Muldoon's eyes looked sad but relieved, like maybe that other life hadn't turned out so well. He clapped Raul on the shoulder and squeezed. "Let's get you home."

A police car pulled to the curb with its flashers on. Muldoon stepped in front of Raul, shielding him from view.

"This had better be good, Muldoon," said the cop, heaving himself out of the vehicle and glaring at the detective.

"They're inside, Sergeant. You should've brought more men."

"Couldn't spare 'em." The sergeant spoke with a funny accent. Like a leprechaun who'd woken up on the wrong side of the bed. "Other divisions might be gettin' those

synthetics, but I prefer my officers to be flesh and blood." He cursed. "*SYNs*. Don't trust the damn things. Ain't human!"

"So you're stuck with the few. The proud. The stretched-too-thin."

"Want a thank-you? A pat on the back? Fine. Nice work. Cross your fingers and imagine a big fat bonus."

"You can't afford my rates."

"Don't I know it. I've given up on you ever joining the force. You'd be a real asset, Muldoon. Uncanny. That's how good you are." He cursed under his breath. "The Blackshirts will be all over this, soon as I file my report. Human trafficking is their dance. The kid will be remanded into their custody—"

"Hold off on the report, Sarge," Muldoon said, stepping forward. "He's been through enough. He should go home to his mother."

Raul peeked around Muldoon's frame, draped in a long black coat. Weird thing to wear in the summer. The sergeant scratched at his unshaven cheek and nodded, squinting at Raul. Thinking things over, it looked like. Was he a good cop or a bad one?

"Get in," he said at last, climbing behind the steering grips of his black and white vehicle. The lettering on the side read **NEWCITY POLICE—TO PROTECT THE RULE OF LAW.**

Muldoon and Raul slid into the backseat. As the doors closed and locked automatically behind them, Muldoon gave the sergeant Raul's address on the other side of HellTown. The police car sped off into the night, carrying the boy and the stranger who'd rescued him to the only place in the world he wanted to be: home.

Fifteen minutes later, Raul's mom was clutching him to her chest outside their tenement and sobbing all over him, and he was hugging her back and doing plenty of his own crying. The relief he felt washed over him like a tidal wave. She kept repeating his name and saying, "Thank you, thank you," again and again.

But when Raul looked back at where Muldoon and the cop had been, they were gone.

Muldoon rested his head back against the seat and closed his eyes as Sergeant Armstrong drove them along the congested city streets, weaving around four-wheeled obstacles in their path. Both of his hairy hands were on the grips. No automatic drive for this cop; he didn't trust the AI.

The kid was back with his mother, where he belonged. The kidnappers were out of commission. And it had taken only a dozen or so attempts. Not too shabby, all things considered.

The only problem? This wasn't his time. Raul might mention Muldoon to his mother, but she would have no memory of hiring him. Because she hadn't. Not yet.

A pinpoint of light started flashing on his wristwatch. He clapped a hand over it before Armstrong had a chance to notice. Soon the alarm would chime, and after that, he'd have a whole lot of explaining to do the next time he crossed paths with the sergeant.

"Let me off here," Muldoon said, reaching for the door's manual release.

"You nuts? This ain't exactly the right side of the tracks. We're still a couple kilometers out from your office."

"Need to clear my head."

Armstrong glanced at him. Then he pulled to the curb, tires screeching. "Tough case. I get that. The ones with kids usually are. But tonight was a win, Muldoon. You saved that boy's life. Feel good about it. You've earned that much."

One out of twelve tries. In every other attempt, Raul hadn't made it. Intervening to prevent the kidnapping hadn't worked. Neither had taking out the van or the men prior to the act. Muldoon had to wait until they were in the apartment with their guard down, once they were at each other's throats. But even then, it had taken three tries to break in and know where each of the men were located in

the front room, which one would go for his gun first, and who was the best shot.

In twelve other realities, Raul was not with his mother right now. If such realities even existed. The thought of it made Muldoon shiver despite his coat.

"Thanks, Sarge." He stepped out of the car and started walking, heading for the nearest dark alley and the frigid tunnel through time and space that would return him to his own.



December 19

"They say you are the best private investigator in town, Mr. Muldoon."

Muldoon leaned back in his desk chair to study the man seated across from him. On the younger side of middle-aged. Ridiculously wealthy. Proportionally unhappy.

"Can't believe everything you hear, Mr. Lewiston."

"Granted." The flicker of a smile appeared on his clean-shaven face, there and then gone. "You are one of the last, at any rate."

"We're a dying breed."

Nowadays, any amateur could play detective on the Link. But some situations required a professional touch. Discretion. Not to mention Muldoon's unique abilities.

"You have quite the success rate."

"I do what my clients ask me to. Keeps me in business."

"You get the job done." Lewiston nodded, pensive. "Even when the task seems impossible. You have put the police to shame on more than one occasion, by all accounts."

"They've got their hands full." Muldoon shrugged. "I fill in the gaps from time to time."

"You are too modest."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Lewiston?"

"My wife..." He shook his head and sank forward onto his knees, elbows digging into the expensive woolish fabric. The slate-grey industrial carpet held his attention longer than it deserved. "Elizabeth. I need you to follow her. I believe she may be...seeing someone else."

"Have you asked her about it?"

"I have no evidence. No reason to suspect anything."

"Yet you do."

"We have not been on the best of terms for the past few months. We have become very cool toward one another, like roommates instead of lovers. We do not even sleep together anymore. Her bed is in the east wing, mine is in the west."

"Long-distance relationships can be tough," Muldoon acknowledged with a somber nod.

"I am no fool. I know she married me for my money. That is why she refuses to divorce me. I suppose I should be happy she has not tried to kill me for it."

"But that's what you want—a divorce?"

"I cannot continue to live like this. I married for love. Our prenuptial agreement is as binding as it is clear. If either one of us is found to be unfaithful, the infidelity clause will allow us to divorce regardless of the other's wishes. All I need is undeniable proof: a recording of her activities."

"Why risk it?" Muldoon leaned on the desk. "If she's determined to continue sharing your fortune, why would she throw that away on some illicit affair?"

Muldoon already knew the answer. But he wouldn't find out until later. Earlier. Whatever. Time travel could really screw with your head sometimes.

"Will you take my case, Mr. Muldoon?"

Muldoon eased his chair back. "Follow your wife. Record what I see. You pay my daily rates plus expenses until I capture her in the act."

"As long as it takes. Say the word, and I will transfer the funds to your account—the first week in advance."

The way things turned out, Muldoon needed only a few days. Mrs. Lewiston was good, international-woman-of-mystery good. Changed vehicles sporadically, had the cabs take her in elaborate circles, never remained at the same destination for more than fifteen minutes until she was certain she hadn't been followed. And she hadn't been, not for long. Not through space, anyway.

Unfortunately for her, whatever spy training she'd received didn't prepare her for a private eye who traveled

through time, who knew where to be and when to be there. Hiding in shadows while his ocular implant captured her hot and heavy shenanigans.

"Shouldn't take me long," Muldoon said.

"You are very sure of yourself," Lewiston replied.

"I'm good at what I do."

"You have that reputation. I hope you live up to it."

"You want me to send you the footage?"

Lewiston cringed. "No, no," he said, looking like he'd tasted something foul. "Share it with her, and advise her to sign the divorce documents. I will send them to you as well. That is all I want from her. There is no need for us to go to court."

There was such a thing as bad publicity, after all.

"I'll see what I can do." Muldoon stood and extended his hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Muldoon." Lewiston grasped his hand with all the vigor of a garden snail. "I will be quite relieved to put all of this behind me. You will find the funds and documents as soon as you Link up." He turned to leave but paused. "Are you married?"

"Never had the pleasure."

"I hope you find someone you can trust. Someone who adores you for who you are. Not what you can give them."

"Sounds ideal."

Little Lord Lewiston left without another word, carrying the weight of his world on shoulders designed for lighter use. Once the office door shut behind him, Muldoon tapped the plug behind his left ear and called up his bank account. His eyes clouded over as the ocular implants focused on the balance. It had never looked healthier.

Even so, Muldoon didn't like the case. Too seedy. Saving lives was more up his alley. Hero complex? Maybe. But it was the occasional case like this one that paid the bills. He couldn't always collect when he rescued people from their

pasts. Holding them hostage in order to ensure his own payday often didn't work out so well. Go figure.

With Alan Jeffries, the guy needed to learn a lesson: Don't gamble away your family's livelihood. Muldoon had no problem holding those types against their will. But kids like Raul needed to get home as fast as possible. More often than not, Muldoon ended up returning victims to their loved ones before the loved ones ever showed up at his office to request his services. They never became his clients, so he never got paid. The more he thought about these wonky causal loops, the less sense they made.

Dirty work like this—playing the role of Peeping Tom, recording things he never would've wanted to see otherwise—kept food in his fridge and covered the rent on both his office and his flat. Paid off his car, to boot, a sleek electric coupe with a borderline passive-aggressive AI. The essentials.

Could he travel back through time and line his pockets with sure bets? Do some big ticket gambling of his own? Maybe. But it seemed to him this whole time travel thing was a power no mere mortal should possess unless it was used for good. Call it fate or karma; either one might not smile kindly on such power being used otherwise. Could be that he was just superstitious, but he refused to seek personal gain without helping people in the process. Making a difference for the better, and getting paid for it. All for the greater good.

That's what he told himself, anyway.

Could he travel into the past and assassinate fascist dictators? Rescue revered historical figures who'd expired too soon? Keep half the world's population from being obliterated? Sure. But there were limits. He couldn't go back to a date earlier than the inception of his time travel device. If the technology didn't exist, he couldn't go there. *Then*. Whatever. It just wouldn't work.

So that gave him only twenty years or so to move around. Plenty of time to change the world, but he wasn't at that level yet. Maybe someday. For now, he'd stick with changes on a smaller scale, work his way up. Temporal technology was illegal, after all, and he didn't want to ruffle any Blackshirts' feathers. They liked the status quo; totalitarian regimes tended to enjoy their power structures. If he started fiddling with the scaffolding, and if they caught him, then it would be *Goodbye, world* for Harry Muldoon.

Had he ever thought about changing his own past? Undoing mistakes? Eliminating regrets? Spend more time with his mother before the Plague took her. Get his father the help he needed before he succumbed to depression and ended it all. Find a good doctor for his childhood best friend, get that heart condition diagnosed early on. He hadn't been able to help any of them. He'd never been able to shake that overwhelming sense of failure.

Depression ran in the family. The suffocating darkness always lurked nearby, waiting to pounce. Muldoon had spent most of his life trying to outrun it. Keep busy, too busy for life to get him down. Don't dwell on the past. Don't think too much about yourself. Your failures. Shortcomings. If he slowed down long enough, the catatonic despair overwhelmed him. Better to remain in motion, do what he could to help others instead.

Messing with his past could mess up his present, damaging the delicate equilibrium he'd painstakingly constructed over the years. Therapy and workaholism were fine bedfellows, and he'd managed to find some peace *in medias res*. No way he'd risk losing that, as much as he longed to see his loved ones again during those better days he'd always taken for granted.

Could he travel into the future? Sure, but what would be the point—other than satisfying his own curiosity? Potential futures collapsed as soon as you returned to your own time. They were *What if?* scenarios and nothing more,

vapors on the winds of constant change. Better to mix concrete in the recent past and watch it harden in the present.

Muldoon was no superhero. Just a guy with an incredible ability. More often than not, he helped people.

But sometimes he had to use their past against them.

The Link entry portal was a virtual expanse of white fog. Muldoon set his pass-image protocols to random shuffle to keep prying eyes off his online activities and spoke to the disembodied face of the operator floating in front of him.

"Send call," he said. His voice never echoed in this boundless space. Somehow, he felt like it should. "Elizabeth Lewiston. West Side Terrace."

"Connecting," said the virtual operator, wearing an outdated headset and smiling artificial white teeth. "Visual or audio only?"

"Visual." If Mrs. Lewiston didn't like Muldoon's looks, she'd stick to audio.

A few seconds passed. The operator continued to smile. Muldoon thought about returning the gesture. He was almost sure the AI wouldn't care, either way. Tough to hurt a computer's feelings.

"Who are you?" A true-to-life projection of Elizabeth Lewiston stood before him, three meters away. Arms folded, wearing a fancy white gown. A gorgeous young woman. Too much for most men to handle, and she sure as hell knew it. "Do you work for my husband?"

"He hired me." Muldoon took a step forward and stopped. He wore a white suit, white shoes. All very afterlife-ish. Truly hideous. One of these days, he'd have to submit a letter of complaint to the LinkCom bigwigs. "To follow you."

"How do you think that will go?" She smiled broadly, amused. "Really, Mr..."

"Muldoon."

"You are not the first. You will not be the last. My husband is a jealous man. He thinks I should devote myself to him alone."

"You married him."

"Yes, I did." Her gaze was cold. "Before I knew what he was."

"Hermaphrodite?"

She laughed out loud. "Close enough. We did not consummate our relationship until after the wedding, you see. He insisted upon it. I assumed it had something to do with his religious upbringing." She leaned toward him as she said with distaste, "*Wayists*."

Muldoon feigned a shudder.

"I found out too late that he had been in a nasty accident as a boy. The AI in the family car went berserk and drove them right into a tree. A real one. The tree, I mean. My husband survived, inheriting the family fortune the same day he lost his parents. But that was not all. Due to the injuries he suffered, he is now more machine than man from the waist down. The doctors did what they could, giving him a synthetic...member. But he cannot control the thing worth a damn, and—"

"Would you like to see the recording, Mrs. Lewiston?" Muldoon said. "Or shall we skip that part?"

"Recording? What on earth do you mean?"

"I told you. Your husband had me follow you. He wanted me to record what I saw." Muldoon cleared his throat. "I saw a little too much, if you catch my meaning."

"I am hanging up now, Mr. Muldoon." Her virtual image flickered and faded.

"He'd like you to sign this." Muldoon held out his hand, and a holo-image of the divorce papers rotated above his palm. "Something about an infidelity clause in your prenup? He'd rather not go to court, if it's all the same."

Her virtual self returned to its former glory. She narrowed her gaze at the documents.

"You are bluffing. You have nothing recorded."

"I'll let you be the judge of that. I'm sending you copies of everything. View and sign at your leisure." He tipped his invisible hat to her as he took a step back. "Don't shoot the messenger."

"Oh, you are much more than that, Mr. Muldoon," she said quietly, her eyes glassy as she reviewed the video. Her jaw clenched and unclenched with fury of the bridled variety. "Voyeur scum is what you are. Private eye, dick for hire? More like a low-life bottom-feeder."

He'd been called worse. "Pays the rent."

"Destroying lives?" she grated out. "How did you get this? When was it taken?" A brief pause before she answered her own question, "Three days ago. You waited three days to contact me. Why?"

"Your husband—"

"When did he hire you to do this? Before he came to your office?" A sinister smile crept across her lips as her eyes focused on him. "Doubtful. I have no record of him contacting you prior to that face-to-face. And that was only yesterday. So why would you have been spying on me before then?"

Muldoon had no comeback lined up for this.

She laughed. "You look surprised! Why would I not keep tabs on my dear, devoted husband? I trust him only as far as his credits cover my comfortable lifestyle. Of course I know when he met you. He so seldom leaves the house!"

Muldoon needed to leave. He'd screwed up, should have altered the video's timestamp. No excuse for such a rookie mistake. Time to vamoose before things got even more awkward.

"How long have you been following me? Who are you really working for?"

"Sign the papers, ma'am. It'll be better for everybody involved."



Muldoon reached for his plug to disengage from the Link portal. As he faded from Elizabeth Lewiston's virtual sight, he heard her scream after him,

"How did you record this? *How?*"

He would have to do better next time.

# ONE

*Twenty Years Ago: 2156*

Nobody came to this side of HellTown after dark. Under the sun, factories rumbled with life, machines cranking out machines while humans supervised, directing cargo marked for shipment. But now, after midnight, the assembly lines rested from their labor, and a cemetery of vacant warehouses loomed over intermittent streetlights, many of which had long ago flickered out of commission.

Someone else might have preferred the Link and a virtual face-to-face, but Muldoon liked the flesh and blood variety, particularly when there was merchandise to be exchanged. He didn't trust the Link entirely. Too many hackjobs, even with the pass-image protocols. Amateurs playing detective, sticking their noses where they didn't belong.

The Peddler had come highly recommended and agreed on this meeting—two marks in his favor. Now, if only he had the item.

The plug behind Muldoon's ear vibrated—an incoming call. He glanced up the alley, then back down beyond the misty glow of the streetlamp. Other than the brimming dumpsters and discarded pallets, he was alone.

The plug pulsed again. He released a quiet curse and watched the vapor of his breath dissipate as he made up his mind.

He tapped behind his left ear, and his vision fogged with the Link's white entry portal. He entered his log-in and set his pass-images to shuffle randomly.

"Thank you for using LinkCom," the larger-than-life, disembodied face of the virtual operator greeted him, her features perfect, proportionate, designed to be lovely. She wore an antique headset and smiled. "How may I assist you this evening?"

"Receive call," he muttered.

"Of course. Only audio is being transmitted. Would you like to proceed?"

"Yes." Not really. But what choice did he have?

There was a short pause. The operator's face dissolved into one of his pass-images: pounding surf on a tropical island seascape. Then the Peddler's intentionally distorted voice came through.

"Change of plans." Deep-throated, garbled. Impossible to identify.

"I'm here, like we agreed." Muldoon thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat and blew out a sigh that hovered in the frigid air. He didn't see it. His eyes were occupied by another pass-image now—some kind of furry jungle animal crawling along a moss-covered bough.

"Appreciated. However, this will have to be a dead drop."

"Fine. Tell me where." *Waiting around for nothing.*

"NewCity Central."

"A little crowded there, don't you think?" From one extreme to the other.

"Locker #316. The key is on your vehicle's front tire. You will be contacted regarding payment once you have retrieved the item."

The operator's cheerful face reappeared.

"Call terminated. Would you like to review your charges?"

"No." Muldoon tapped his plug to disengage from the Link and strode up the dark alley.

Someone had been there, but he hadn't stuck around for a meet and greet. Muldoon cursed. He hated games. It

should have been a simple exchange of credits and product: he was the buyer; the Peddler had the item. But now?

He crouched beside the hood of his vehicle, a sleek two-seater built for speed and fuel efficiency. His hand brushed along the rubber tread beneath the fender until his fingers stumbled across the plastic keycard. It was there, just as the Peddler said it would be.

He palmed the driver's side door, and the pad glowed beneath his fingers, recognizing his print. The door rotated upward. He dropped into the bucket seat behind the steering grips, leaving the door to drift back and lock itself into place.

"NewCity Central," he said, buckling the safety harness across his chest.

"Clarify," droned the impassive voice of the dashboard computer's AI.

"The train—NewCity Central Station."

"Confirmed. Estimated time of arrival: ten minutes."

The car pulled away from the curb on automatic drive and accelerated, steering grips tilting side to side with every turn.

Muldoon dropped his head back and closed his eyes. Was he being set up? Possibly. *Part of the territory*. But the credits he earned on these side jobs always made it worth the risk—even if the train station was swarming with cops in plainclothes waiting for him to trip up.

He was no dummy. He'd buy a ticket, play it cool, maybe take a nap on one of the benches. When it looked safe, he'd find the dead-drop locker and pick up the item. Then he'd beat it—as nonchalantly as possible.

A nap was the best idea he'd had all day. He was already nodding off by the time the car reported, "Destination," and eased to the curb beside a wide expanse of concrete steps, stark white in the hazy moonlight. "Park or idle?" The door swung upward.

"Park."

He stepped out onto the curb, and the car door dropped shut behind him. The steering grips tilted automatically as the engine accelerated toward a vacant parking structure across the street.

He faced the imposing edifice with its thick marble pillars supporting a neoclassical façade. NEWCITY CENTRAL TRAIN STATION was engraved at the pinnacle in formidable Roman lettering. During the morning commute, these steps were cluttered with countless workers making their daily pilgrimage to a better life, one paycheck at a time. But not now. The trains this time of night ran only on the hour due to the law of supply and lack of demand. There wouldn't be another one pulling out for another forty minutes.

He reached the top of the steps and glanced over his shoulder. Nobody was tailing him—not yet, anyway. He took a quick breath as the thick glass doors slid aside with a whisper.

His boot heels struck the lustrous marble floor of the plaza and echoed against the arched ceiling. Three levels tiered outward in all directions. On the main floor, giant benches stood like pews in some grand cathedral, alternately facing one another. Automated ticket kiosks lined the far wall, and beyond them sat gates to the rails where most of the trains slept peacefully through the night. The second tier held restaurants and souvenir shops, purveyors of the plastic crap tourists were so fond of. Banks of lockers, leased up to a month at a time, were located on the third level, along with the security station and its surveillance crew.

He restrained his eyes from wandering upward.

And he kept himself from walking too fast, striking the marble too hard, echoing too loudly. He had a right to be there, same as anybody else—even though none of them cared to exercise it tonight, by all appearances. The restaurants were dark and silent; the shops had closed their electric security gates, pulsing white at regular intervals.

Only one of the twenty-odd ticket kiosks ahead of him glowed active. The others were dim, out of service.

He passed between the benches that loomed up like sentries on either side of the center aisle, their backs too high to tell if anyone was seated or sprawled out until he'd already stepped past each one. Empty—all of them.

*I'm at my own funeral. And nobody showed up.*

Not the sort of thing to think about if he wanted to stay focused on the job at hand: looking cool and collected to his hidden audience.

There were eyes watching him: digital cameras hidden in a silk plant here, a ceiling fixture there. Up in the surveillance center, some overgrown rent-a-cops probably kicked back with a pot of bad coffee and a grease-soaked box of donuts. Those doughboys were sure to be watching the vidscreens—their only source of entertainment.

*Don't look up. Don't look around. You need to be out of town by morning for a business trip. Make your way to the kiosk like you've done it a million times. The touchscreen is simple to navigate. Even a chimp could do it. Let the scanner read your ident tag. The ticket drops into the tray. Reach in and take it. Good to go.*

All part of the plan. He stuffed the ticket into his pocket and yawned. His fingertips brushed the plastic edge of the locker keycard as he faced the invisible congregation.

*Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to remember Harold James Muldoon...*

The closest pew would do. Big, solid, built out of synthetic materials to look like oak. He staggered toward it and surrendered to another gaping yawn. The benches were designed to be uncomfortable, of course; the purpose of this place was to travel, not stay put. But he tipped over as soon as his rear end made contact. His arm, half-bent, made a good enough pillow, and he curled his legs up behind. He could feel the camera lenses focus on him, and he imagined

the donut-munching security officers eyeing the monitors for a few moments before losing interest.

Muldoon's ticket was for the next train, expected to arrive in thirty minutes. He would relax there a while, even as his heart raced, thumping an anxious pulse deep into his bowels. Adrenaline surged and receded in bursts—he recognized it for what it was. He had to control it, force himself to focus on something else besides the moment at hand.

In a few minutes, he'd pretend to wake up with a start. *Can't fall asleep, I'll miss my train!* He would wander around, looking for the restroom. Explore the second tier, find it boring, head up to the third. Locate the locker and retrieve the item. Head back down to take a seat on the bench, rub at his eyes, make his utter exhaustion look convincing. *That part will be easy.*

If only it had all gone according to plan.

An hour passed in the lifeless station. One train came and went with a mild rush of stale air. No passengers had disembarked or boarded, and the massive steel serpent had continued its nearly silent journey elsewhere. On his bench, Muldoon snored and drooled, dead to the world, with one leg slipping off the edge and dangling awkwardly. Numb, due to lack of circulation. Never fun waking up to that.

But he didn't wake up, not even when a woman in black stepped through the sliding glass doors with heels that struck the marble floor in a purposeful staccato. She had a reason for being there, but it wasn't to buy a ticket.

More than an hour remained before the station would come alive with support staff arriving to wake the sleeping kiosks, restaurants and shops. But for now, everything was still and quiet save for the sound of her footsteps.

The woman approached Muldoon as if she'd already known he would be there waiting for her. She stood over him, watching him. Her black dress hugged her figure but

bared her ivory-skinned arms from the shoulders down to long, white-gloved fingers. She carried a small handbag and held it close to her hip with one hand. A wide-brimmed hat with black lace obscured her facial features, draping them in shadow.

"Wake up, Mr. Muldoon," she said quietly.

He snorted, eyes jerking open with a start. He sat up too fast and had to brace himself, head swimming, mouth and chin wet. *Was I drooling?* He whirled to check the massive analog clock on the far wall.

"You've missed your train," she said.

Only then did he focus on the woman standing before him.

"Yeah. I noticed." He winced at a sudden cramp near his left kidney.

*Good thing I wasn't really planning on going anywhere.*

"Do you make a habit of sleeping in public places like this?"

"Every now and then, yeah." He glanced up again and squeezed the tension in his lower back. It had been a long day, and working these night jobs was definitely starting to catch up with him. But there was no excuse for this lapse. Inwardly, he cursed himself. How could he have been so careless? "Can I help you, ma'am?"

"I certainly hope so."

But that was all she said, regarding him warily from behind her veil. She wasn't bad to look at, that was for sure. Italian roots, maybe, with a figure women half her age would have been more than content to call their own. He faced her, giving her his full attention. And she seemed to appreciate it, like a woman does when she's got a man right where she wants him.

"I want you to leave," she said. "Right now."

*Must think I'm an undesirable.*



Plenty of them crawling around the streets these days, but he doubted many managed to grab any winks in this place. For one thing, the benches were spotless. Undesirables tended to leave a telltale layer of residue behind, wherever they went.

He reached into his coat, and she took a step back in alarm.

"No, look—my ticket." He held up the flimsy strip of plastic, illuminated by his train number and departure time in holographic print. "I'm not spending the night here," he reassured her.

"You need to leave." Adamant now.

*What's she going to do? Call security?* That wouldn't be good. *They might not let me back in.* When would another chance like this present itself? He'd had the place to himself, and he'd squandered it by flying under the radar. Why hadn't he gone straight for the locker—security be damned? He'd talked himself out of plenty an awkward situation with law enforcement in the past. He shouldn't have tried to play it safe tonight. *Look where my little charade's got me now.*

"Okay." He held up one hand as he returned the useless ticket to his pocket. "I'll go."

He rose to his feet under her watchful eye. She took another step back, her bag close to her midsection. Who was she? Some wealthy investor with stock in the commuter train division? Did she think he was dangerous?

He glanced down at his attire. A little disheveled, but he obviously wasn't a vagrant. His car had parked itself right across the street, for crying out loud.

"Just need to get my stuff." He gestured up toward the third tier.

The item. Sitting alone in locker #316. Waiting for him.

"Leave it."

He parted his lips to reply, but she came close all of a sudden, her dark eyes wide behind the veil as she pressed against him.

"They know," she whispered.

He stiffened. Only his eyes moved, rotating to the side, then up. Security? There wasn't a single officer in sight. Only this strange woman seeming to know a lot more than she should. Was she just another player on the scene, attempting to sway him off course?

He replaced his fedora, tipping it to her out of some obsolete chivalrous habit, and left without a glance back, hands thrust deep into his pockets. Tension gripped his gut and wrung it tighter with every step. The short hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention. They wouldn't relax until he was far away at excessive velocities.

He could feel them watching him: the woman, the security cameras. Had the police already been Linked? Were they on the way?

*The Peddler set me up.*

His fingers closed on the keycard in his pocket, and the echoing rhythm of his steps slowed to a stop. He half-turned to glance back, the brim of his hat casting a shadow across his eyes. The woman stood between rows of pews like one of the lonely faithful, clutching that handbag of hers as if her life depended on it. She returned his gaze.

Maybe she was right. Maybe the authorities knew what he'd come for, and they were on their way to stop him. But in the silence, only one thought emerged that really mattered:

*They're not here yet.*

He broke into a run—not out of the building, as common sense would have dictated, but straight for the stairs leading to the third tier and locker #316.

Muldoon's coat flailed behind him, his arms pumping as he mounted the steps two at a time. The clatter of his footfalls echoed from every wall with a rhythm that demanded attention, like a man standing atop a twelve-story building, prepared to throw himself down—but first he's got to draw a crowd.

*This is suicide.* The lengths a detective would go to for the Holy Grail. *The last will and testament of one Harry Muldoon—*

He shook his head to clear it. The odds stacked against him were high enough to collapse at any second, but he clung to a thread of hope that he could still pull this off. His plans had already unraveled, and the introduction of this new player on the scene—Madame Mystery—wasn't helping matters any. But he couldn't leave without the item. He was closer now than he'd ever been before. It was in the building. He just had to get to it before the authorities arrived.

Even if police showed up en masse and cornered him between the rows of lockers, cuffed him and carted him off to the gulag on smuggling charges, if the item turned out to be what it was supposed to be...then there was really nothing they could do to stop him. Not for long, anyhow—assuming he could figure out how to use it.

He glanced mid-stride down at the main floor of the plaza. The woman was nowhere in sight.

The glass-walled surveillance center sat at the top of the stairs. He headed straight toward it with the audacity of a fully wired terrorist. He half-expected to see a pair of security officers crammed into uniforms long past their expiration date come barging out of the sliding doors with batons swinging and shrill whistles blaring. *You there! Stop!*

But there was no commotion. Instead, a cold silence welcomed him.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe they hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. Muldoon was just your average commuter who'd overslept, after all, and he'd climbed up here to collect his belongings. Nothing amiss. *They* didn't know anything at all about the item in locker #316, and the woman in black had just been blowing smoke—sent to scare him off-target.

But sent by whom?

He slowed to a stop, even though he wasn't close to the lockers. He stood outside the glass exterior of the security center and stared inside, his reflection holding a frozen, slack-jawed expression of horror. Comical if it hadn't been so warranted.

The wall-length vertical blinds were wide open, drawn to the sides, giving any passerby a clear view of the office. A bank of vidscreens lined the far wall, and two security officers manned the desk facing them. Donuts, coffee—and blood. Lots of blood. The overweight men sat slumped forward in their swivel chairs, their uniforms sopping wet, drooling onto the floor where slick pools collected like spilled paint. Their throats cut, nearly decapitated, they stared unseeing at the static-jittery screens before them.

Muldoon blinked through his reflection. He'd seen his share of death over the years, but nothing like this. Never anything so vicious. The two men hadn't stood a chance against their assailants. Their hands dangled nowhere near their holstered sidearms.

*They know...*

That woman couldn't have meant these guys. Only a couple minutes had passed, maybe less, since his rude awakening on that bench. Judging from the volume of blood, the two guards had already been like this when she'd woken him.

So she'd meant someone else—more than a single assassin. One man or woman couldn't have done this. It would have taken a couple ninjas at least.

And *they* were still here.

He rotated his eyes from the glass and turned to face the lockers across the corridor. They stood grey and silent like crypts, rows upon rows. He focused on a placard with holographic lettering vivid under the dim ceiling lights: 301-400.

Retrieving the keycard with one hand, he reached into his coat with the other. Under his left arm, his fingers curled,

tightening on the grip of his revolver. He slipped it from its holster, the steel barrel glinting as he started forward, one deliberate step at a time.

The support staff would arrive within the hour. They would find the security officers' remains and watch the surveillance footage from the timestamp before the screens went fuzzy, when the feed had been disrupted. What would they see?

Their prime suspect, asleep on a bench.

*Me.*

Muldoon couldn't think about that now. Keycard in one hand, revolver in the other, he strode down the aisle. There it was: #316. He inserted the key and waited. His pulse thumped spastically along his carotid arteries.

The pinpoint of light above the locker door switched to green. He grasped the handle and pulled it open. With a quick glance over his shoulder, he reached inside.

Sitting all alone in the spacious locker like it had been abandoned decades ago...sat a plastic timepiece. A wristwatch, like something a kid would wear, but adult-sized.

His anticipation fizzled. This couldn't be it. He slipped the flimsy thing onto his fingers and stared at the square face. The digits were correct—time and date accurate—but otherwise, there was nothing special about it at all.

Obviously, the Peddler had a sick sense of humor. Maybe someday Muldoon would find this moment funny. Not a chance of that right now. The bodies of those two men across the corridor kept things in perspective. Muldoon was risking his life just being in the same building with them...and their killers.

He snapped the watch onto his wrist—nothing else to do with it besides toss it into the nearest waste receptacle—and slammed the locker shut with a curse.

"Good evening."

A bald man in a white robe stood no more than a meter away, blocking the only escape route. Arms crossed in a casual stance, he stood barefoot with both hands tucked into his generous sleeves. He smiled tightly with dark, indecipherable eyes that lit upon Muldoon's revolver.

"Hey, how's it going?" Every muscle in Muldoon's frame tensed at the sudden appearance of this peculiar monk. He kept his tone easygoing even as, reflexively, he aimed his gun at the fellow's chest. "You-uh, need to get in here?"

"Not anymore," said the man in a thick accent—Eurasian, maybe. But his skin looked whiter than an albino's. His smile didn't waver. "You have what I came for."

Muldoon frowned. "Really?" What kind of weapon could do the damage he'd seen in the surveillance center? A long blade maybe, short enough to hide up a baggy sleeve. But there wasn't a single drop of blood anywhere on this guy.

*Never seen anybody so white.*

"The watch. Give it to me, please."

Muldoon laughed. He couldn't help it. He held up the back of his hand, and his sleeve slipped away from the timepiece. "This piece of crap?"

The white man's eyes locked onto the watch. "It is not *crap*, I assure you."

"Sure looks like it. Just the kind of junk you'd find in cereal boxes back when I was a kid."

"Then you should have no problem parting with it."

Muldoon nodded. "Sound reasoning there. But here's the thing: I haven't been following much in the way of logic tonight." He shrugged nonchalantly, then confided, "I'm not really acting like myself." *On any other job, I would have cut my losses and run a long time ago.* "Insomnia really messes with the old noggin after a while. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. Why else would you be out so late in your pajamas?" Muldoon paused, tightening his grip on the revolver. "Too rowdy back at the monastery?"

The monk's smile loosened. "You try my patience."

"I'm the one with a gun here, so how about you step aside and we'll part company amiably. This place is going to wake up soon, and I'm sure the police will want to investigate the mess you made." He gestured toward the surveillance center. "Assuming that was your handiwork."

The man bowed at the waist. "But they are not here yet, Mr. Muldoon."

A blur of white flapped forward and up, and with it came the flash of a short sword, slicing through the air. Muldoon staggered back in surprise and fired twice, only to find that his adversary was flying, leaping with bare feet from one side of the aisle to the other, launching himself off the locker doors. Pulse rounds left Muldoon's revolver like electric-blue fireballs, slamming into the far wall and ceiling, sparking with energy as they fizzled into black burns. He brought up his arm to fire again, but the albino's gleaming blade struck the barrel, breaking it free from his grasp. The gun skittered across the floor beyond his reach. Then a heel plowed into his chest, doubling him over, and he went down wheezing onto hands and knees.

The man in white stood at ease before him, one hand out to the side, allowing the robe's sleeve to droop under his elbow. The other hand grasped a samurai's *kodachi* firmly by the hilt.

"You will give it to me, or I will cut it from you," he said, backlit by the shuddering ceiling lights. Discharging pulse rounds in a confined space had a way of monkeying with the power. The backup generators were struggling to keep everything running smoothly.

Muldoon struggled to catch his breath. "You're gonna hack me up anyway. Admit it."

The smile returned. "But it need not be painful."

*That's a relief.*

Muldoon dropped his head, glancing back to check on the current location of his gun. Two meters behind him. He unfastened the plastic watch.

"It's a little outdated."

"Power is never out of date, Mr. Muldoon." The monk lowered his blade. "Place it here. Do not try anything, or your death will be full of much pain."

*I think I'm starting to like this guy.*

He tossed the watch up into the monk's face and rolled over backward. His fingers closed on the grip of his revolver just as the samurai's sword launched up into the air and came down, straight for him. Muldoon rolled aside and pulled the trigger once. The pulse round hit the white robe in the chest full-force, half a meter from the muzzle. The high voltage rendered the monk instantly incapacitated, and he fell hard, twitching spastically at the foot of the lockers. Then he lay still under the flickering lights with a large patch burned black on the front of his robe.

Muldoon nudged him to make sure he was down for the count. Then he kicked the sword aside and stooped to retrieve the wristwatch. He glanced back at the samurai before he turned to leave.

"You can get these pretty cheap on the Link." He slipped the watch on and shrugged. "If you've really got to have one."

Support staff were already filtering into the plaza as he descended the steps to the main floor. They frowned at each other curiously as the lights worked hard to stay on. A brownout?

He tugged down the brim of his hat and forged ahead, passing through the sliding glass doors and out onto the expanse of concrete steps beyond. He glanced at the plastic face of the wristwatch as he reached behind his ear to Link up and call for his car.

The *item*? Couldn't be. Not this piece of junk. Yet that white samurai had been willing to dice him up for it. Made absolutely no sense. Had the Peddler received a better offer



from someone else and left the plastic timepiece as a way of telling Muldoon he was out of his league?

His hand drifted away from his ear. He hadn't Linked up. He hadn't needed to. There sat his car, already idling at the curb as if it had been waiting for him the whole time. The driver's side door glided upward as he approached.

He frowned. "I told you to park—"

He stopped, staring at who sat in the passenger seat.

"Hello, Mr. Muldoon," said Madame Mystery.

*How does everybody know my name?* He slipped his hand inside his coat.

"Won't you get in?" The hat and veil were no longer in place. Instead, the woman wore a gorgeous smile, one with soft, full lips and immaculate teeth. But her eyes didn't match the mood of her expression. They held a sadness that kept her distant, despite her close proximity as he dropped into the driver's seat.

"You going to tell me who you are?" He faced her with as much bravado as he could muster. He'd already entertained enough surprises for one night. What he needed right now was sleep—that little nap on the bench had been just an appetizer, leaving him hungrier than ever.

Her smile faded as her gaze rested on his watch. "You didn't take my advice."

His door shut and locked itself.

"Destination?" droned the dashboard computer.

"Just sit tight," he snapped at it. He shook his head at the woman. "I don't know what you want from me—"

"Do you think it's wise for us to sit here?"

Where did she expect him to go—and take her with him? An image of the two security officers came back to his mind, and he knew this was the last place he should be. With the staff already filtering up the steps into the station, it wouldn't be long before one of them stumbled upon the carnage upstairs.

"Drive," he told the computer.

"Destination?" it droned.

"Surprise me!" He threw up his hands.

A short pause. "Invalid destination."

"Manual override," he muttered, punching the ignition pad with his thumbprint and taking hold of the steering grips. The car veered from the curb and accelerated to join the groggy morning traffic. "Buckle up." He tugged on his safety harness.

She did the same. The white gloves were gone, and her naked fingers fastened the straps just below her bust. She caught him glancing her way.

"You should probably keep your eyes on the road, Mr. Muldoon."

Cursing under his breath, he whipped the grips to the left and veered around a slower-moving vehicle to keep from plowing full-speed into its backside.

"And you should slow down," she suggested. "Manual driving requires—"

"I know how to drive!" *Why am I shouting?*

"Do you wish to resume automatic drive?" droned the computer.

"No!" Still shouting. He exhaled. *I've got to calm down here.* He glanced at her before returning his attention to the road. "You got a name, lady?"

She watched him, studying him. "Relevance?"

He almost threw up his hands in exasperation, but decided against it. Truth be told, it had been a while since he'd driven manually, and he'd nearly forgotten how hands-on it was.

"Fair exchange of knowledge. You somehow know who I am, but I can't say the same about you."

"You will," she said. "When the time comes."

*So cryptic.* He glanced at her again, but she didn't return his gaze. She stared at the stupid watch on his wrist.

"What do you know about this thing? Why would anybody be willing to kill for it?"

"You really have no idea what it is," she said.

*It can't be. Not this.* "I know what I came for. And this isn't it, believe me."

"Appearances can be deceiving, Mr. Muldoon."

"Riddle-speak. Is that your language of choice?"

A smile played on her lips. "You're not as direct as you imagine yourself to be."

"How so?"

She looked up at his face, at the corners of his eyes and mouth. They seemed to hold some rare fascination for her.

"What are you planning to do with it?"

She had to be another player on the scene, like the white samurai. Only instead of a frontal assault, Madame Mystery was trying a distinctly different approach. Muldoon hoped he wouldn't have to shoot her too. He never played rough with women. Blame it on his antiquated notions of chivalry.

"Someone in your line of work might find this device to be quite an asset."

"My line of work," he echoed. "What do you know about me?"

"You're a detective. Private sector. You solve cases involving missing persons, crimes of passion, and the like. People pay you to help them sort their lives out. I assume you thought the BackTracker would help—"

"It's not for me," he said. He glanced at her as the light changed and the car lurched forward with a tap of the accelerator. "I'm just the middle man."

*Lying through my teeth.*

Her slim shoulders lifted and fell. "But you have it now. What will you do with it?"

"You never know, the Link might be off by a millisecond or two. Good to have a backup timepiece." He winked at her. "Punctuality happens to be one of my pet peeves."

She remained silent.

"How'd you get in, by the way?" He gave her a sidelong glance. "You make a habit of hacking into people's cars?"

"Oscar and I go way back."

He frowned. "Oscar?"

"Your car. Didn't you know it has a name?"

"He-uh...never told me." Muldoon's gaze wandered down the dashboard console.

"You're changing the subject. We were discussing your new watch."

"*Old*, by the looks of it. Can't believe it still works."

"If you keep deflecting me, we'll be here all morning." Her tone was patient, as if she had all the time in the world.

"Sorry, that won't work for me. Like you said, I've got a day job." He winked again. "So, where should I let you off?"

"Who is the Peddler?"

That threw him. The Peddler—the one who'd gotten him into this mess in the first place. *Highly recommended, my ass!*

"Who?"

"You like to play games," she said.

"Tiddlywinks, mostly. Up for a round?"

She shook her head, weighing her words. "I found you too late." Her voice was barely audible.

"You didn't have to find me at all, you know."

She seemed to be reconsidering her intrusion into his life. *Can't say I blame her.* As a rule, he wasn't the most hospitable to unexpected guests.

"Oscar—pull to the curb," she said sharply.

The instant those words left her lips, the steering grips rebelled in his hands, jerking to the right and cutting off three lanes of traffic.irate horns blared outside. Muldoon cursed, his useless hands in the air.

"Idling," said the computer as the passenger door lifted.

"What the hell was that?" Muldoon managed, wide-eyed.

"A universal override command. My father invented these auto AI systems. If you're very unlucky, you might meet him someday."

Without another word, Madame Mystery unbuckled her harness and gathered her handbag, gloves and veiled hat. Then she stepped out.

"Hey-uh—" He didn't know what else to say. His mind reeled. Lack of sleep, combined with just a few too many bizarre experiences, had left him a little off his game.

She stopped, turning back toward him. "Good day, Mr. Muldoon."

He leaned across the passenger seat and glanced at her shapely calves. Couldn't help himself. "How do you know my name?"

Her eyes, dark and gorgeous, locked onto him as she said, "I was your wife, Harry. In another life."

With that, she was gone.

He stared straight ahead without seeing much of anything, listening to the steady rhythm of the mystery woman's heels as they faded away. He didn't know what to make of what she'd said. So he stuck with what came easy: *Wacko*.

"Destination?" droned the computer as the passenger door dropped into place and locked.

He turned vacant eyes to the console before him. The woman had completely overridden manual control of the vehicle. How was that possible?

"So..." he mused aloud. "Oscar, huh?"

No response.

Nobody talked to their cars—besides the standard list of voice commands. Never on a first name basis, for crying out loud.

"Is that your name?" He waited. "*Oscar*?"

"Destination?" it droned, the monotone as lifeless as ever.

He dropped his head back against the support cushion. The sun was just starting to peek over the eastern skyline, lighting up the grey clouds and chasing the shadows off the streets. He glanced at the watch. Strange. He hadn't worn one in years, not since he was a kid, yet it still seemed natural to check time the old-fashioned way.

"Office," he exhaled, rubbing between his eyes. It was going to be a long day. He could already tell. And being up for most of the night hadn't helped matters. "Automatic drive."

"Confirmed. Estimated time of arrival: five minutes."

He glanced at the watch again. Five minutes from now, he'd pull up out front of the immaculate steel and glass Hancock Building, tell *Oscar* to beat it and find a place to park. He'd take the stairs to the twelfth floor, eighth office down. Home away from home.

His mind wandered to the item as the steering grips jiggled left and right on their own, propelling him along the streets at over a hundred kilometers per hour. From all accounts, there was an old inventor, an eccentric, who lived deep underground. No images of him were available on the Link. When the government outlawed his line of research and raided his labs, he went into hiding, and nobody ever heard from him again.

Then a few years ago, buzz started circulating online about one of his inventions, a temporal displacement device called the *BackTracker*, the only one of its kind the government hadn't managed to get their hands on and destroy. A secret auction had raised its already substantial value by millions, week by week. Everybody wanted a shot at it.

But there was a problem. Nobody knew what it looked like. And even if some lucky devil managed to track it down, no one would have a clue how it worked. Time travel had always been science fiction—and not very good sci-fi at that.

So what if you were able to transport yourself into the past. What good would it do? Wasn't everything set in stone?

There were entire sites on the Link dedicated to educated speculation. A temporal displacement device would have to function according to preconceived notions of space-time and quantum physics and the like. All mumbo jumbo to Harry Muldoon.

He just knew that such a device, as outlandish as it was, would make his day job a whole lot easier. The thought of it was incredible: to be able to go back in time and gather the facts needed to solve cases. He would get to see things as they truly happened, not as he presumed they came about. He'd become the most sought-after detective in all of NewCity, because he'd be the only one solving cases one hundred percent of the time.

But he'd known it wouldn't come cheap. So he started dabbling in a few alternative vocations on the side to augment his income. Smuggling, mainly, under an alias: *G.M. Shue*. So witty. And with the credits he accumulated, he started making connections, the kind money could buy and reputation could keep. He delivered what he promised and expected the same in return, and he always got what he paid for.

After placing the highest bid in a live Link auction, he was finally connected with the Peddler, someone he'd only heard of—by reputation, of course. Muldoon had presented himself as the middleman, representing a very wealthy investor. Word couldn't get around that a private investigator was amassing so many credits, after all. The government would want a piece of the pie, and then Muldoon would never be able to afford the prize. The Peddler had agreed to meet in HellTown for the exchange, and the rest, as they say, was history.

Muldoon frowned at the watch. An eccentric inventor's clever disguise for the greatest invention of all time? Or the Peddler's idea of a joke?

"Destination," the computer droned.

Muldoon glanced out the window. There it was, in all its industrial splendor: the Hancock Building, one hundred twenty floors straight up. A tribute to function over form.

"Park or idle?"

"You figure it out." Muldoon unbuckled his harness and ducked out under the rising door.

"Invalid command."

"Deal with it, *Oscar*."

Had the new name stuck? Maybe. An image of Madame Mystery's eyes drifted back through his mind. "Oscar and I go way back," she'd said.

*I was your wife—in another life...*

He shook his head as he entered the lobby.

"Good morning, Mr. Muldoon." The SYN security guard raised its hand awkwardly and forced a fake smile. Everything about these creatures was fake. Genetically engineered life. Sacrilege taken to a whole new level, in the eyes of some. Synthetics created by synners.

But Muldoon returned the gesture. SYNs were almost human, more or less.

He passed the lifts and headed straight for the stairwell. He needed to get his blood pumping, and this was the best way he knew how. It usually took him a little over two minutes on a good day. Today, it took him three.

A bit winded as he shoved open the door to the twelfth floor, he entered the silent hallway and glanced at the watch again. Almost six in the morning. Nobody else would be in yet—except for Jeannie, of course. His AI assistant was nothing if not punctual.

He passed the doors of his neighboring offices, each with frosted glass painted in bold lettering below their logos. An insurance company sported a winding road. A travel agent had hot air balloons. Muldoon kept it simple: HAROLD MULDOON, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR.



But the door wasn't how he'd left it. It stood slightly ajar.

He slowed his approach and reached into his coat, performing mental math. Three shots fired at the white samurai. That left three pulse rounds in the chambers of his revolver. He gripped it as he nudged the door open the rest of the way and looked inside. No signs of forced entry.

"Jeannie?" Silence dampened his voice. He waited, listening. Had he just forgotten to lock up? In too much of a hurry to meet the Peddler out in HellTown? "Jeannie, lights on."

Nothing. It remained dark—

So dark he didn't see the flash of white or the steel blade plunge into his chest and out through the middle of his back, withdrawing just as quickly. He fell to his hands and knees as if replaying the scene at the train station. Only now he stared mutely as blood gushed forth onto the industrial carpet.

The white samurai wiped his blade clean across the floor and tucked it into a drooping sleeve of his robe, its chest marred by the black burn of a pulse round.

## TWO

*Now: 2176*

White rain cascaded onto black streets and shimmered in the moonlight, collecting in pools to reflect hundreds of square windows from skyscrapers above. Curvaceous sedans and sleek coupes splashed through intermittently, but any disruption in the rippled mirror below them was hardly noticed. Black umbrellas bobbed along slick sidewalks and hid grey faces, protecting well-kept hair from the elements as quick, sure steps carried those who looked like real men and women along their way.

Pairs gestured and waved at taxicabs that splashed past, and on occasion, one would pull to the curb, cutting off the automobile behind it with a blaring horn. Gratefully, the pair would enter the cab and shake umbrellas outside before shutting the side door. And the cab would reenter traffic with another splash and another honking horn from another impatient automobile behind it. AI drivers could display irritation almost as well as humans.

He watched.

The pattern repeated itself with very little variation. Differences were minute, few and far between. At some moments in time, the rain fell harder, heavier, making its presence known. At others, more automobiles congest the street. But the umbrellas came and went without regard to these slight variations, along with the pairs of well-dressed couples and taxicabs that carried them to their common destination:

The Pearl.

The most popular spot in all of NewCity, a club where drinking and dancing were an evening ritual that extended all through the night. The owner wanted everyone who entered to check their problems at the door with their coats and enjoy all that The Pearl had to offer.

It was a place to savor life. A place to feel human.

The boy standing in the shadows across the street blinked away the rain as he watched his stoop-shouldered father dodge automobiles and ignore irritable horns. The old man charged headlong onto the sidewalk without an umbrella and stood there for a moment, swaying, facing the bright lights of The Pearl.

Curious frowns were cast his way by those who passed, bumping into him. They ambled toward the long line waiting to enter the nightclub. They were the regulars. This was their home away from home. Their umbrellas protected him briefly, and as he was given momentary respites from the pelting rain, he came to himself. He almost turned around.

The boy clenched his fists down at his sides and grit his teeth against the cold. He willed his father onward. They both needed to know where she was.

The old man's eyelids fluttered against the rain, and his unshaven jaw trembled. He squinted against the glaring lights. He ducked his head and sniffed, wiping his nose along the sodden and frayed sleeve of his coat. He looked up again and shuddered. This was it; this was the place. He just had to go in.

If only he had the nerve.

A taxicab splashed toward the curb behind him, sending a murky wave over the backs of his shoes and across the sidewalk. He gasped as his socks were soaked. He turned to share a choice word or two but found a bustling group of umbrellas headed his way. He bumped from one to the next, carried forward by their momentum all the way to the dark awning in front of the club. They laughed at him. They thought it was a game, shoving him playfully about.

He struggled against them, but they whirled him around with cheers and jeers to face the guard at the door. His heart nearly stopped. He looked up at the imposing frame of the mandroid and knew this was a very bad idea indeed.

"Name?" the well-dressed machine droned, standing head and shoulders above him and everyone else.

The robot's eyes glowed without human expression. They expected an answer—a quick, precise one that could be checked against the programmed guest list. The owner welcomed one and all to The Pearl as long as they made a reservation, and as long as their credit checked out.

"Tell it your name, buddy," prodded the tuxedo behind the boy's father. "Aren't you on the list?"

More laughter, from all of the umbrellas.

"Name?" the mandroid repeated, but this time it reached forward mechanically with a scanner in its massive hand.

"Oh-oh, look out," cried the tuxedo. "You better be tagged, or you're gonna get it, Pops!"

The boy's father tried to back away, but he was pushed forward, stumbling. The mandroid snatched his forearm and pulled the coat sleeve away from his wrist, applying the scanner in a routine manner. It lit up with a welcome chime. The chuckles behind him subsided into curious murmurs.

"Cyrus Horton." The automaton stepped aside and swept an outstretched arm toward the glowing warmth and music that emanated from within. "Enjoy all that The Pearl has to offer," it said in a deep monotone.

If a sudden gust of wind had decided to blow at that moment, the boy's father wouldn't have stood a chance against it. He swayed again. He stared into the club and blinked at the sparkling white evening dresses on the women as they pranced side to side on the dance floor with their tuxedoed partners. The music was alive, and it coursed through everyone in there, pulsating in every smile and

glance and movement. Even the pairs seated at their small round tables on the tiered upper levels nodded their heads and tapped their feet in sync with the beat. It was a symbiotic relationship: rhythm and host.

He wasn't sure he belonged.

"It said you're in, chump!" The tuxedo jabbed his back, nudging him forward. "So make up your mind already—or get the hell out of our way!"

He swallowed and drew in a quick breath. With a glance at the mandroid, frozen in its congenial gesture, he took a step forward and then another, deliberately. The rainwater squished in his socks. He was glad the music kept anyone else from hearing it.

"Your coat?"

He looked up from his shoes and found that he'd already stepped inside. What's more, he stood at the coat counter. A pretty girl with freckles and bright eyes was asking for his coat. She smiled like she didn't think he was intruding here at all. He wondered if she was a synthetic.

"Uh—yes, thank you." He shrugged out of the heavy sleeves, just as she came around the counter to lend a hand.

"Wet out there." She lifted the soggy wool from him and held out a ticket in her small ivory palm.

He looked first at the ticket, then into her eyes. For him?

"For your coat, whenever you want it back." She smiled too warmly to be human.

He hesitated, then pinched the ticket from her palm. She giggled like gentle bells and took his coat behind the counter, back to the racks where others like it, only newer and not so wet, already hung in rows. He watched her go until she was out of sight. Then he took a quick breath and started down the steps into the heart of The Pearl, where the music was loud and the lights were bright.

This was it. Now or never.

The dance floor drew the crowds. The BigBand on stage played like their lives depended on it, their clean silver instruments gleaming in the lights. Their slick black hair shone like wet asphalt. The music was Gershwing—or Glenmiller. He couldn't be sure. It had been so long... Two hundred years, at least. He watched the dancers for a full minute as he stood there dripping on the plush carpet.

Most of the tables around the perimeter of the club were taken. Pairs sipped drinks in between chatter and laughter and involuntary movement to the rhythm. They couldn't help themselves. It was in the air.

There were a few tables in the back, in the corners, on the upper tiers. It was difficult to tell who sat in the shadows, appreciating their privacy as much as the music and the drinks, served by quiet waiters. People of influence of all kinds usually preferred dark corners.

If *he* was here tonight, he would be at one of those tables.

The boy's father looked side to side, scanning the large room. He found the stairs. With another quick breath, he headed toward them like a man on a mission, ignoring the looks from the pairs seated at their tables as he passed. Unlike the coat girl, they knew he didn't belong.

But he was on the guest list, as surprising and strange as that was. They could see for themselves, if they wanted to go and check.

Was that a good thing? He didn't know, couldn't decide. His brain was getting fuzzier these days. Perhaps due to his age. All that mattered was one thing: finding her before his expiration date. Giving the boy his mother back, so he wouldn't have to grow up alone.

The carpet on the staircase was charcoal-toned and thick, engulfing his sloshing shoes as he took the steps one at a time. He gripped the metallic banister, pulling himself upward. Waiters passed him with silver trays and clinking martini glasses, ascending and descending without giving

him a second glance. More synthetics, probably. They didn't know any better.

He reached the second level of the club just as the band finished its number and the crowds applauded, the dancers turning to face the stage, the pairs rising from their tables to show their appreciation. In the corners, shadows stirred. Even people of influence enjoyed good music and those who could perform it well.

At one table at the far end of the room, the shadows remained still. But the boy's father could tell that someone sat there. Maybe it was *him*.

Things were about to change in his life, and while there was no way he could possibly know the details of what was to come, he was aware enough of his current place in time and space to feel that he was about to set his life on a new course. He needed it to be true.

He needed to see her again. More than anything.

The squishing from his shoes was all he could hear as he carefully approached the table, his hands clasped in front of him in an unconscious gesture reflecting his own self-doubt. What would he say?

The band struck up the next number below, and the dancing throngs responded in turn, this time with even greater fervor as the rhythm sprinted into a faster time signature. The shadows in the corners seated themselves as he passed. He kept his eyes to himself, his shoes silent again beneath the all-encompassing blanket of music. He glanced up at the table before him.

"Hello?" His voice sounded weaker than he would have liked. He shuffled his feet, keeping almost a meter between himself and the table's edge. "Are you...?"

His mind was jumbled. Why hadn't he planned out what he would say?

"Sit down." The voice from the dark was commanding, but low enough to avoid attracting attention.

The boy's father obeyed, faltering with the chair as he pulled it back from the table and took a seat. He blinked, wishing his vision could pierce the gloom.

"Are you...the one I'm looking for?"

The shadows stirred. A martini glass rose from the table and disappeared into preternatural dark. "That depends," the voice replied after swallowing. "Whom do you seek?"

The glass returned to the table half-empty.

"The *BackTracker*," the old man whispered it like a prayer.

Silence. He noticed that he was holding his breath. The music throbbed inside his skull.

The voice returned, calm, in control. "And you think he is here, at The Pearl. Tonight."

"Yes." He felt his heart thumping. Too loud. Too desperate. "I believe so. I was told—"

"By whom?"

"I don't know, really. They're on the Link. They've got a whole site devoted to him."

A slight chuckle emanated from the shadows. "You really shouldn't believe everything you see online, Mr. Horton."

*How does he know my name?* He got to his feet quickly—too quickly, knocking into the table and spilling the martini glass.

"And now look what you've done," the voice chided in an ironic tone. "These tablecloths don't come cheap, you know."

It wasn't him. This was the wrong table. Everything about this was wrong.

"Pardon me—I must have been mistaken. I'm sorry..." He backed away, his breath coming in short gasps, his heart shuddering against his ribcage. "Excuse me."

Laughter erupted from the shadows as he turned on his heel and hurried toward the stairs. This was a very bad idea. He never should have come here.



Downstairs he went, sloshing, dripping a trail behind him, clutching onto the banister and pulling himself along. He dared not look back. He could feel eyes fixed on him, their attention following him. Not a good feeling.

The tuxedos and sparkling dresses were only a blur, the music only brash noise as he reached the foot of the stairs and proceeded past the coat counter. He didn't stop. The claim ticket was still crumpled in his pocket when he shuffled out through the crowded exit and into the downpour beyond.

The cold hit his lungs like crushed ice and he gasped, folding his arms across his chest to shield himself. The line of tuxedos and dresses under the awning caught sight of him and stared. The umbrellas on their way out knocked into him from behind, sending him off balance toward the alley. There he stood, swaying, defeated.

He had failed, and now he would have to face his son and tell him.

The boy could see him from across the street. He knew the truth. His father tried to hide such things from him, but it never worked. He wasn't stupid. He could tell that the old man was struggling these days, unable to focus—except when it came to obsessing over the boy's lost mother. A woman his father described incessantly in glowing terms but whom the boy had never met. Not that he could remember, anyway. His father hadn't been able to stop talking about her for the past two weeks. Hadn't been sleeping or eating. He was a haunted man.

"Just come back, Dad..." He pulled his soaked coat tight across his middle and watched.

The old man had somehow lost his own coat. That wasn't good on a night like this. He stood there in the alley, looking displaced. Was he crying? Or was it the rain? The fancy folks heading into the club ignored him. He was nothing to them. He staggered forward, holding his

forehead, losing his way. Why was he going farther into the alley?

The boy tried to call out to him, to bring him back, but the splashing automobiles were too loud and drowned out his voice. Blinking against the rain, he looked for a break in the traffic. He would have to run across the street. He could do it, he was fast enough.

Shapes stirred in that alley—two large ones. They towered over the boy's father. Mandroids? What were they doing?

The boy emerged from the shadows and headed for the curb. Umbrellas passed, almost knocking him over. He had to get across the street. But there were too many cars. One sped by closer than it should have, sending a dark wave of rainwater over his tattered shoes. He gave a short gasp at the sudden cold between his toes.

What was happening over there?

The mandroids blocked his father's path, one in front and the other behind. When he moved, they moved. He seemed more alert now. He wanted to get away. He needed to. The boy needed him to.

A side door from the nightclub opened into the alley. A tuxedo with an umbrella stepped out alone. He said something to the boy's father, said a few things which didn't seem to be understood completely. Then he said something to the mandroids and turned his back, reentering The Pearl. The door swung shut behind him.

The mandroids grabbed hold of the boy's father and tore him in two pieces. Blood gushed like black oil in the moonlight.

The boy screamed with all that was in him and charged into the street.

A strong hand clamped his shoulder and jerked him backward, sending him sprawling across the slick sidewalk. He fell hard, bracing himself against the brick building. For a split-second, he stopped screaming. He stared up at the

silhouette of the man who'd thrown him down. The man stood facing him, backlit by the glare of The Pearl and the passing automobiles. He didn't move.

"Get out of my way!" The boy charged forward.

"You don't want them to see you." The man caught him easily and held him by the arms. His voice was quiet but strong, like his hands.

The boy kept screaming to be let go, drawing attention from the umbrellas that passed. But their looks were fleeting. They didn't care enough to be all that interested.

The man kept his back to the alley across the street. The traffic splashing behind him might have drowned out some of the boy's racket. But the mandroids would still be able to hear and see him, if they turned this way.

"Shut up, kid." He looked down at the boy, rain spilling from the brim of his fedora and landing in the kid's face.

The boy stopped screaming for a moment and sputtered instead, cursing the man. "Did you see what they did?"

"Yeah." He'd seen it before—folks on the wrong end of people with power. It was never pretty. "If you don't want them to come over here and do the same to you, you'd better keep quiet."

That did the trick. The kid went rigid, staring up at him.

He relaxed his hold on the boy's shoulders, but kept him in place. Then he turned his head to the side, and his hat cast a shadow across his facial features. He glanced at the scene across the busy street.

The mandroids were gone. What remained of the boy's father lay on the slick filth of the alley floor in two motionless lumps. Rainwater mixed with the blood and carried it into the gutters. Just a few meters away from the carnage, umbrellas chattered in line while they waited under The Pearl's front awning. They hadn't seen a thing. But even

if they had, it wouldn't have mattered. None of them would have done a thing about it.

"Can't you...Link up the police?" the boy said.

Sure he could. "They wouldn't care, kid."

The boy wept then, his tears mingling with the rain that streamed down his cheeks. He hung his head, all out of fury. He knew it was true. These days, cops were never around when you needed them. Only when they wanted to get you into some kind of trouble.

The man let go of his quaking shoulders and looked down at him. Twice he opened his mouth to say something to the boy, but no words emerged.

"You hungry?" he finally managed.

Hungry? The boy's stomach was probably inside-out. How could he think of eating? His father was gone. The scene from the alley replayed in slow motion in the man's mind, blood streaming out in every direction...

The boy pitched forward and vomited onto the man's shoes.

*Guess not.*

Then the kid crumpled to the sidewalk, out cold. The man cursed under his breath, a sudden desire to flee surging within him. This wasn't his problem. Maybe he shouldn't have kept the boy from charging into traffic. He could have minded his own business, like the rest of these mindless umbrellas.

What was he supposed to do now?

The small ashen face lay at his feet, sodden clumps of dark hair plastered across the boy's brow. He looked...familiar, somehow. But that was crazy. Impossible. Just another kid who'd lost his father. The world was full of them.

Rain pelted down without mercy, splattering, dribbling. Black shiny shoes splashed past without heed. It wouldn't be long until a pair or two kicked this young undesirable into the gutter to drown. It was the way of things.

Glancing once more across the street, toward the alley, the man knelt down and hefted the boy up over his shoulder in a single movement. Rainwater sloshed down from the brim of his hat. Then he rose. Without a word to any of them, with his face still in shadow, he carried the boy through the oncoming foot traffic, ignoring the curses hurled at him from the umbrellas his shoulders pushed aside. They needed to get over themselves.

But he couldn't draw too much attention. He needed to get the kid off the street, away from here. He didn't know what he would do after that, but this was a start.

His black hat bobbed alone among curved, glistening octagons. Like a fish swimming upstream as the tide flowed toward The Pearl, temporarily confused by anything moving in the opposite direction. He reached the end of the block and turned left, down a side street. Here, the lights gradually dimmed to black. The sidewalks were silent and vacant, cracked and neglected. The rain followed, but there were no splashes from automobiles or honking horns, only the sound of water rushing through storm drains.

One dark block of tenements passed, followed by another. Intermittent streetlights flickered, barely alive, leaving shadows to overtake any passersby. The man's eyes roved as he walked. It was habit. He knew this area and what to expect lurking in the dark.

In another life, he might have been born here.

Eventually, this part of town would be torn down to make way for luxury apartments, funded by the owner of The Pearl. It would be touted as a new age for the heart of the city, a reconstruction of the civic spirit. The ever-present undesirables would be pushed outward yet again, as far away as possible from the ones who really mattered—those with robust, expendable lines of credit. The city officials would turn a blind eye as deals were struck behind closed doors by people of influence, but the end would justify the means: the city would flourish, and it would become what

this Province was known for, its pride and joy, attracting humans and synthetics alike from all over the continent. And the owner of The Pearl would triple his fortune in the process.

But for now, it was as it had always been: the outskirts, the other side of the tracks, the area you avoided at night.

Locals called it HellTown.

With the boy jostling over his shoulder, held in place with a hand on his back, the man mounted one flight after another of indoor stairs. Tenement 3166 had its share, dull grey in the stairwell's weak light. Seven floors remained before he'd reach his apartment. So far, the kid hadn't stirred. Had to be out cold for this climb not to wake him up.

The man tried not to think too far ahead. Get the kid warm, wrapped in a blanket or two. Let him sleep. Keep an eye on him. Figure out what to do next. He knew better than to fret too much about it. He might turn around and head right back down.

The hallway on the eighth floor was unusually quiet. The walls, stained with graffiti, seemed to be watching as the man carried the boy past five scuffed doors toward unit 806. He raised his hand, ashen in the jittery fluorescent light, and pressed his palm against the sensor grate beside the door. The momentary glow showed through his squared fingernails. The door clicked open, and he nudged it the rest of the way with his foot.

"Lamp on," he said, and light instantly emanated from the far corner of the room where a small lamp sat on an end table. It illuminated the black faux-leather couch beside it, strewn with wrinkled laundry.

He brought the boy to the couch and set him down with care. Still out. The corner cushion made a good pillow. There was a thin blanket among the laundry, and he covered the kid with it. He watched him for a moment. Then he shook his head and turned away.

*Let him sleep. Figure things out later.*

He was hungry, he realized. When had he eaten last?

The wet soles of his shoes squeaked across the black and white kitchen tiles. He tugged open the steel door of the refrigerator, and it creaked too loud in the silence. He shot a glance toward the couch. The kid didn't stir.

The man took off his hat and set it on the linoleum counter between the empty sink and the fridge. The humming light washed his face in white as he bent forward to peer inside. He blinked. There wasn't much. Cold cuts. Mayo. If the remnants of sourdough in the cupboard were still good, he had the makings of a passable midnight sandwich.

He pulled off his overcoat and draped it over the back of a chair in the kitchen's dining nook. Wincing slightly, he adjusted his shoulder holster. He usually took it off this time of night, but seeing what had happened to the kid's father, he decided to keep the revolver close. Not that one of the pulse rounds in its chambers could do much against a mandroid. But all six might cause some damage. Slow the thing down, maybe. That's all he could hope for.

The man exhaled as he let the refrigerator door creak shut. The tuxedo and those mandroids in that alley—hired muscle. Titanium. They'd torn up the old man like he was nothing. What had the tuxedo wanted from him? Why this kid's father? Who was he?

No longer hungry, the man sat heavily at the round kitchen table and looked across the room at the boy. The blanket covering him rose and fell with each breath. He looked like he would be sleeping through the night.

*Then what?*

The man dropped his head and squeezed the back of his neck. This wasn't a good idea. He didn't get involved in other people's problems. Not anymore. Not since...

He stood up. It didn't matter—looking back, trying to make sense of where things had gone wrong. There was nothing he could do about it now. He was stuck *here*. He just

had to deal with it, make the best of things. Nothing could be changed. He had to move forward.

He focused on the kid's face—unable to shake how familiar he looked; maybe someone from another life, as crazy as that sounded—recording it with his ocular implant as he tapped the plug behind his ear and activated the Link interface. Instantly, his vision was consumed by the entry portal, a white expanse of virtual fog. It waited for his log-in name and preliminary pass-image, which he provided, blinking out of habit. Once he was in, he ran the boy's face through a dozen citizen search programs but was careful to shuffle his pass-images at random intervals to keep prying eyes off his trail. He didn't want company tonight.

A coastal scene of crashing surf at dawn. A classical guitarist performing in concert at an outdoor amphitheater. A birds-eye view from a hang-glider over a yawning canyon. Images slid past the periphery of his vision, verifying his ident and user privileges while the Link attempted a match. Some people had only a few pass-images loaded in their plugs, but he knew better; the more you had, the less likely you could be hacked.

He liked his privacy. He'd earned it.

He held out his hand, blindly returning to his seat at the kitchen table. SCANNING... SEARCHING... scrolled across in tandem. It didn't usually take this long. A few seconds, tops.

Maybe the Link was more congested than usual tonight. That might explain why the hall outside was so quiet. Was there something going on that he didn't know about? Some kind of virtual celebrity meet and greet? Judging from the foot traffic outside The Pearl, he would have thought everybody was enjoying their Friday night out on the town. Everybody who mattered, maybe—the ones with the robust credit. For everyone else, there was the Link and its countless virtual vices.

SEARCHING... A polar bear and two cubs wandering across an ice shelf. The sun rising over a desolate



wilderness. Evening urban traffic with lights and honking horns. More pass-images slid by as he waited. This much lag time usually meant one thing: somebody out there was trying to run a trace.

He had nothing to worry about; his images were too random and varied. He would log off long before he ran out. But why would a search on this kid warrant a trace?

Maybe he should have logged off. But he didn't. Not until a knock came at the door.

He stood. One hand went to his holster while the other reached behind his ear. He blinked as his vision of the room around him was restored, a disorienting blur at first. The kid remained sound asleep. Amazing, really.

*When was the last time I slept like that?*

The revolver slipped easily into his grip as he approached the front door. He came alongside it and tapped the vidscreen. A hazy grey and white image appeared, its vantage point located above the doorframe. The two visitors outside were shaved bald and wore long white robes. Both of them stood with their hands tucked into the cuffs of their generous sleeves, across their midsections.

Followers of the Way. Holy men.

*Cult members.*

He glanced back at the kid. He didn't want them waking him up. But he doubted they would leave before pounding on the door a few more times. They had souls to save, after all.

Maybe he wanted the boy to enjoy what little peace he could before reawakening to the nightmare his life had become. The man sighed. Maybe he just wanted the kid to sleep through the night so he wouldn't be any more trouble until morning.

Either way, the man holstered his revolver and wiped his hand across his face, rubbing away the exhaustion and frown lines. Trying to. These cult members were easier to get

rid of when you put on your best fake smile and nodded a lot. He wondered if he had the energy for it.

"Good evening to you, Mr. Muldoon," said the one on the left with a slight bow as soon as the door cracked open. The other one bowed as well. "You are Harold Muldoon, unit 806? We hope we are not disturbing your peace this evening."

Muldoon forced a smile and shook his head. But he gestured with his hand that they needed to keep it down.

"My—kid's sleeping," he said in a half-whisper. He blocked their view inside by leaning against the doorframe.

They nodded, smiling up at him. Their skin was dark and flawless, their teeth stark white in contrast. "We will take only a moment of your time."

If that were true, they would have left already.

"We see that you are not Linked up at the moment," said the one on the right.

*Very observant.*

"Do you often?"

"Link up?" He knew where this was going. These cults—all of them, as far as he could tell—had something against the Link. They didn't want their members turning into zombies.

*Ironic.*

"Yes," they said in unison.

He shrugged. "As much as the next guy, probably. Something wrong with that?" He had to feed them the right lines, get them on track. The sooner they shared their spiel, the sooner they'd get the hell out of here.

They nodded again, but their tight smiles dimmed. Earnest sincerity filled their eyes as they took turns imploring him, "It will destroy your soul, friend. It will take all that makes you human and leave you an empty shell." The one on the left shook his head emphatically. "You must shed your interface, friend. Only then will you be free to live as the Creator intended."

Some of these cults had their own quack surgeons who would, for a generous donation, remove your plug in some empty supply closet and free your soul to be indoctrinated by their cult leader instead of LinkCom. It was a tradeoff, obviously. It just wasn't so obvious to them.

"Do you ever feel that your thoughts are not your own—that someone is always watching you?"

*All the time.* "You mean—that's from Linking up?" Was he moving too fast? *Just give me your inane literature and beat it already!*

They nodded again, like a pair of marionettes minus the strings. "Your soul yearns to be free, to live as the humans of old. And we can help you. We can free you from yourself."

*If you only knew.*

The door to the stairwell at the end of the hall creaked open as a wet figure emerged with head and shoulders drooping, dripping. He stood there swaying, drawing Muldoon's attention away from the two monks. The figure glanced up for only a moment before he ducked his head and shuffled off around the corner.

The boy's father. In one piece.

"What the hell...?"

"Yes?" The holy man on the right craned his neck forward to show he was listening.

Muldoon blew past them, his swinging holster catching their startled eyes. The door to his apartment slid shut as he took off down the hall, footfalls pounding.

The door slid shut, but not before one of the monks withdrew a *kodachi* from his drooping sleeve and inserted the long blade between the door and its frame, holding it open.

Muldoon reached the end of the hall and veered around the corner, fully expecting to find the wet figure of the soul he'd seen torn apart less than an hour ago.

But the hall lay empty.

His feet skidded to a halt as he stared. Instinctively, he reached for his gun. Something wasn't right here.

"Hello?" his voice echoed.

The silent walls mocked him as if they knew he'd seen a ghost. Such behavior was out of character for him. They'd never seen him break his stride before. Always calm, cool. Never out of sorts. He even looked out of breath.

Wet prints glistened across the tile.

It had been no ghost.

He dropped to one knee as he drew his gun. The flickering light from above made the tracks clearly visible. They staggered up the hallway a few meters. Then they stopped. He followed them until they ended. They didn't turn right or left; they didn't double back. They just ended.

*Like he vanished.*

He swiveled his head, glancing from one side of the hall to the other. The vidcams above the doors recorded his every move. The most action they'd seen all night.

He holstered his gun and stepped toward the door on the right, his eyes fixed on the last pair of wet sole prints. He curled his fingers into a fist and knocked once, twice. Loud enough to be heard, not so hard that it sounded like the police. He waited.

He didn't know who lived on this side of the building. He barely knew who the tenants were around his own unit. Once or twice he thought he'd recognized a couple of them as they passed him in the stairwell, but he wasn't sure. Everybody in HellTown looked the same. Grey skin, burdened shoulders, eyes that hadn't seen sunlight in far too long. Link-addicted zombies, most of them.

He knocked again. This time, he added, "I'm from 806." He didn't know what else to say.

*Cup of sugar? No. I'm looking for the dead father of a boy I've kidnapped.* Right. That would go over real well.

He looked across the hall at the opposite door. He stepped around the slick shoe prints and knocked twice, hoping someone inside would summon whatever remained of their humanity to chance a face-to-face with a stranger. He glanced down at his holster. Maybe he should have taken it off.

He looked up the hall at the next set of doors. Their vidcams wouldn't have the right angle for what he needed. What did he expect to see? The boy's father shuffling along, then disappearing into thin air?

*Maybe I should just go back, run the kid's face through another citizen search.*

The cult members were probably gone by now. He could make that midnight sandwich, maybe two.

But he couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong here. He'd felt it before—often enough not to ignore it. In his line of work, he knew better.

That was then. Things were different now. He was invisible, and he liked it that way. The world didn't need him to save it anymore. Even if it did, he was out of commission. Why couldn't he just sit back and enjoy his early retirement? Forget all those pasts. Forget what they had done to him.

He raised his fist to knock again when the door clicked and slid open half a meter.

"Hey-uh..." His voice trailed off.

The jittery light from the hall barely penetrated the darkness inside. It was like a black hole, sucking in all light but not reflecting anything. The smell was rank, as if nobody had lived here for a while but had left it a mess. Or—worse—something had died.

Little fingers crawled around the edge of the door. The fingernails were long and unkempt. A small face emerged to stare up at him with sagging eyes, dark behind the tangled mess of black hair. She looked close to twelve years old, but he couldn't be sure.

"Hey." He tucked the gun into the back of his pants.  
"Your parents home?"

Her eyes betrayed nothing. They just opened into space and aimed themselves up at his. She looked like a zombie, but that wasn't possible. She was too young to have a plug of her own.

"You all alone here?" He hoped not. There was nothing right about leaving a kid in a place that smelled this bad. "I need to check your vidcam. I'm...running routine maintenance. Landlord's orders."

She didn't move. He wondered if she could understand him. But it didn't matter. The door was open, and he knew what he had to do. So he stepped in, pushing the door aside with the little fingers still attached. She staggered sideways but didn't make a sound. He had to act fast and get out. The last thing he needed was any trouble. He had plenty enough as it was.

The pads below the vidscreen were illuminated faintly, like in his own unit. This one wouldn't recognize his voiceprint, so he manually tapped in the code the police used to override the system and load the files by time index, everything from five minutes ago until now. The boy's father—or whoever it was that left those tracks in the hall—would have to be on record.

He could feel the girl watching him, probably wondering what he was doing. He glanced at her, and the same vacant stare met him without a hint of curiosity.

He looked back at the screen. The hall had been empty four minutes and fifty-five seconds ago. The digits blinked forward at the bottom of the vidscreen. The image was hazy at best, but he'd be able to see what he needed to.

*Why? What will it prove?*

Something within him wanted the wet figure to be the boy's father, wanted him to be alive again. Forget solving the mystery of that vanishing act; he just wanted the kid to have his father back.

*Then I won't have to worry about him. Was that the real reason?*

He remembered what he'd seen from across the street—right before the kid had tried to charge into oncoming traffic. Two mandroids and one unfortunate victim. But before that, there had been a tuxedo under an umbrella. Almost hidden, he'd spoken as if he wanted something from the kid's father. He didn't get it, so the mandroids did his dirty work and left the bloody pieces to rot.

Or did they?

The white digits blinked past four minutes ago. That's when a shadow appeared at the right edge of the screen.

Muldoon leaned in for a closer look, not that it helped any. The picture quality was bad, too fuzzy. But he saw the man—wet, bedraggled, shuffling along in a hurry, glancing over his shoulder.

*He knew I'd seen him?*

The old man stopped where the tracks ended in the hall outside and ran a hand through his sodden hair. Agitated. He glanced up at the vidcam and blinked, his unshaven face sagging with the realization that he was on camera. He didn't look away. He stared at the lens, resigned to the fact that someone would be watching. He reached into his coat pocket.

*He wasn't wearing a coat when the mandroids—*

The old man turned away, hunching his shoulders over something in his hand. It flickered white light, and the air rippled before him, like a pool of water reflecting everything around it. Then he disappeared, stepping into that ripple and vanishing from sight.

Muldoon caught his breath.

*What the...?*

A low groan came from behind him. Muldoon reeled, grabbing for his gun. The darkness was less complete now, and he could make out the forms of two figures seated on the couch, sagging into the floor against the far wall. They

stared into space, the light from the hall glinting in their wide, cloudy eyes. Heads tilted at odd angles, they sat still with their fingers twitching intermittently down at their sides.

Zombies. They might have been this little girl's parents at some point, but that was a long time ago, before the Link had stolen their lives. Now they were online 24/7, and she was on her own.

"Sorry, kid," he muttered, stepping sideways out the door and keeping his gun out of her sight. He glanced at the vidscreen. "Thanks."

Her eyes registered nothing. But they watched him as he moved into the hallway. They knew he was there. He was real, but he didn't belong. She reached up to tap the pad beside the doorframe, and the door slid shut.

Muldoon coughed involuntarily. The smell of feces and rotten foodstuffs had coalesced into a haunting stench that churned his stomach against his will. Just another example of why this part of town was known as Hell.

He couldn't allow his mind to wander. He had to focus. Couldn't do anything stupid like trying to rescue another kid, no matter how much she needed it. He'd already done enough rescuing for one night.

The boy's father was alive. And somehow he was able to make himself...invisible?

*That's some trick.*

Muldoon replayed the image in his mind as he returned to his unit, his footsteps echoing alone in the vacant hallway. That flicker of light as the old man had turned away. A flame? And what was with the air changing its shape, its substance?

He wished the video had been clearer. He might have had better luck running the father's face through a citizen search.

The sensor grate at his unit glowed through his fingernails. The door clicked and slid open. He helped it on



its way and allowed it to swish shut behind him as he headed toward the couch.

The kid was gone.

He charged into the bathroom. Empty. He slammed through the bedroom, the closets. Nothing. He returned to the front room and stared at the couch.

The laundry hadn't been touched. It looked as if the kid had never been there.

*Maybe he never was.*

Muldoon collapsed onto the black cushions. He held his head in his hands, let it fall back and rest on a pile of half-folded cotton shirts. He stared up at the ceiling and squeezed his temples. Then he shut his eyes as conflicting memories whirled like a tornado within the confines of his skull.

There had been a boy. There had been no boy.

There had been a murdered man. There had not been a murdered man.

Cause and effect? Cause or effect? Effect without cause? No cause, no effect? A loop with no beginning and no end and no way to make it stop short of a lethal round to the brainpan.

*It's happening again...*

He cursed and leaned forward, his elbows landing hard on his knees. He shook his head, cradled between his palms, moaning against the cold fear swelling within him, the darkness threatening to suffocate him.

He didn't have the strength to fight through it. Not tonight. Not after what he'd seen. What he thought he'd seen. What he couldn't possibly have seen.

*Not again.*

## THREE

The downpour was torrential, white in the sparse light from a single streetlamp high above the alley. Sheets of rain pounded the slick pavement and exploded in black oblong puddles that had been collecting for hours. Streams rushed along the bricks on both sides and carried scraps of trash out toward the street where taxicabs splashed against the curb to release passengers destined to dance the night away.

Sheltered by the doorway, Gavin Lennox adjusted his tuxedo jacket with one hand and gripped a black umbrella down at his side. The warmth of the BigBand music behind him was chilled slightly by the thunder outside. His eyes blinked once, focused. There was someone in this alley he needed to see. The rain would not stop him. He was not hesitating; it was not in his nature to delay the inevitable. He merely sized-up the situation. And it took him no more than a moment to do so. Satisfied, he thrust the umbrella out against the pressure of the precipitation and ejected the canopy, stepping beneath its protection as he entered the alleyway.

The eyes of the looming mandroids glowed, directed toward him as he invaded the periphery of their vision. Two automatons, each dressed in an extra-large tuxedo similar to his own. He made sure they dressed well. They seemed less obtrusive that way, despite their unnerving size and reputation as refurbished killing machines from the war. They were as human-like as possible.

Now the mandroids stood over a sodden undesirable, their oversized hands gripping his stooped shoulders and holding him in place between them. He had no coat, and he

stood drenched to the skin like a soggy old dog. His grizzled face had seen its share of sorrow, perhaps more than the standard allotment. His grey clothing was tattered, his shoes showing the wear that came from not owning more than one pair, nor an auto, and from not having the credit to pay a cab's fare.

In stark contrast, Lennox stood with pristine black shoes shining in the white light, his suit and coat purchased for him the previous day, especially for tonight. A new suit every night The Pearl opened. Even his umbrella was new. Only the best for Gavin Lennox, proud purveyor of all things enjoyable in the real world. It was what NewCity expected of him and of his popular nightclub—for most, the only one in town that mattered.

What brought these two men together? The haggard vagrant, looking lost and frightened but trying to force a brave face, blinking his eyes against the rain and squinting up at the mandroids restraining him. The well-dressed nightclub owner without a wet spot on him, his grip on the umbrella steady, his dark eyes set with a determined ease. What could these men possibly have to discuss in this foul-smelling alley?

"You left without saying goodbye, Mr. Horton." Lennox smiled a dazzling set of perfect teeth, his tanned, clean-shaven face creasing at the sides. "Not the most polite thing to do after I was so kind to welcome you into my club."

"I'm sorry, I—" Horton still had the courage to tug against the mandroids' hold on him. A gutsy if futile endeavor. "I don't know why I came. I—"

"That's a lie." Lennox released a well-crafted chuckle, one designed to confirm his control of the situation. "You told me: something about...the *BackTracker*?" He watched the old man frown and shake his head. "I can show you the vidfeed, if it will refresh your memory."

Horton's face sagged with the realization that he'd been caught on camera.

"I was mistaken—"

"How long have you been underground, Mr. Horton? Twenty, thirty years? Hiding from the Feds, pursuing your peculiar line of research." Another chuckle. "You know what I want."

Blinking, sputtering. "I don't know—I just saw something on the Link—"

"Of course you did. It was there for your eyes only." Lennox shook his head with a mix of pity and disdain. "It didn't even cross your mind that you were being set up? You came like an overzealous mouse, following a trail of cheese. Right to my door." Lennox clenched his jaw. "I will ask you only once, Mr. Horton. What have you done with the BackTracker prototype? Whom did you give it to?"

A man never looked so perplexed. "Me? How would I know? I came here looking for *him*. He's the only one who can find—"

"My mistake." Lennox glanced up at the closer of the two mandroids, standing head and shoulders taller than he could ever dream of being. "Clean up this mess."

He turned his back on the situation, knowing his word was law with these automatons.

The warmth of the music embraced him as he let the door to the alley slam shut on his heels. He dropped the umbrella to his side and collapsed it. His eyes blinked reflexively in the spray, but he was well out of range, and not a single drop of it soiled his sharply pressed tuxedo.

"I can take that for you, Mr. Lennox."

He looked up from his attire and focused on the freckled porcelain doll before him. She held out her small hands for the umbrella.

"Wet out there." She smiled. The sweet innocence of artificial life.

Maybe not entirely artificial; definitely not human. They weren't cheap, but Lennox knew the benefits more than outweighed the cost. How many SYNs did he have running

The Pearl these days? He'd lost count. And he couldn't even begin to remember their names anymore. This one might be a Sally—the same as the one behind the coat counter. A service model, like those dressed as waiters out on the main floor and the tiers on all sides of the stage, carrying drinks and appetizers to every table without ever getting an order wrong or dropping a single plate. Even the band—only the absolute best for The Pearl. And the best musicians these days were synthetics.

"Thanks," he managed as she took the dripping umbrella from his grasp. He never knew what to do when one of them spoke to him. Usually, they minded their own business, did their jobs to perfection, never overstepped. The managers took care of them, keeping him from ever needing to enter into small talk. "Busy night." He turned his gaze to flashing lights at the end of the hall where the band reached a crescendo.

Sally nodded and widened her eyes emphatically. "Like you wouldn't believe, sir. It's a real NewCity Who's Who out there. Even the *mayor's* here tonight!"

Interesting. *He and I have a few things to discuss.* "Keep up the good work." Lennox turned away and stepped past the SYN toward a door marked PRIVATE. He palmed the sensor grate and the light glowed between his fingers. The door slid aside instantly.

"Thank you, sir." Sally watched him step inside as the door slid shut and locked automatically behind him. The umbrella in her hand dripped onto the carpet, but she didn't notice. She watched the door marked PRIVATE. Her eyes blinked. Then she turned away, back toward the lights and music from whence she'd come.

The hallway was dim but with enough light from the glow strips along the floor for Lennox to make his way up the familiar stairs. His apartment above was a spacious penthouse. He seldom used the lift. He took every

opportunity that presented itself to improve his physique, so climbing stairs was a natural part of his daily regimen. He wasn't even winded when he reached his door after four flights of climbing.

"Lights," he said as the door glided aside, sensing his approach.

A soft glow emanated from every corner of the living room, illuminating sofas, armchairs, end tables, ottomans, and open spaces covered with plush area rugs. Contemporary art, in some cases consuming entire walls with their bold designs in black, grey, and white, added to the feel of an apartment designed for entertaining large groups of people on a regular basis.

But tonight it was empty, and Lennox didn't spend more time in the main room than it took to walk straight through, head down a long hallway lined by multiple bedrooms and bathrooms, a game room, a theater, and an elegant dining room that could seat fifty comfortably. He turned right at the end of the hall and entered the study. There he slowed his pace and scanned the numerous bindings of priceless antique books arranged by genre until he found the one he was looking for.

He reached forward with a deft touch and tilted Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* back at a sixty degree angle. That was all it took to unhitch the hidden latch, and a portion of the bookcase eased backward into the wall, revealing a door. He ducked his head as he stepped through into darkness beyond.

Voice commands would go unheeded here. The central AI's reach did not extend beyond the bookcase. So in this secret closet-sized room, Lennox had to reach blindly to the left to flip a switch on the wall. The blast of white from the globe above was intense, and he squinted at first. But eventually his eyes grew accustomed to it, blinking until he could focus on the mirror before him.

He surveyed himself out of habit. Slick black hair meticulously combed back from his forehead. Eyebrows just as dark, trimmed evenly to restrain them from monopolizing his brow. Eyes that had seen everything there was to see in this life. Nothing could surprise them, yet they burned with intensity, focusing on everything they turned upon. Perfectly tanned skin gave him the look of one well-acquainted with the rugged outdoors. His solid square jaw added to this illusion. But he knew the truth. He hardly ever stepped outside The Pearl. The tan came from a machine. So did the genes for his jaw and muscular build. Was he any more real than a SYN?

He reached for the mirror like a man saying his last goodbye. His fingers tapped a pattern committed to memory on the invisible keypad, and the square mirror door bounced outward, revealing the contents of a safe hidden inside the wall.

A silver cigarette lighter. A stack of master keycards. Hard copies of important documents he stored on the Link; one could never be too careful when it came to building an empire. Backups of backups were often necessary.

He pocketed the lighter inside his tuxedo jacket and turned away, swinging the safe shut with one hand and flipping off the light switch with the other. He ducked out into the study and righted the hardbound copy of *Dr. Jekyll*. The secret door eased shut behind him. His momentum carried him out of the study and across the hallway to a large room with comfortable chairs arranged in a semicircle facing an empty wall.

"Window," he said.

The wall dissolved into a pane of glass, and below, with every floor easily visible from this high vantage point, The Pearl radiated in all its splendor. There was the stage, with the SYN musicians playing their hearts out. There was the dance floor, moving with a life all its own. The tiers on every side glittered with activity, waiters bringing orders, others

taking away empty glasses and plates, pairs of patrons moving toward the dance floor, others retreating to their tables for a breather. It looked like a full house tonight. Yet more patrons flooded inside, dropping off their coats and umbrellas at the counter where a Sally worked tirelessly, smiling incessantly, inviting them to enjoy all that The Pearl had to offer.

A night to forget the cares of their polluted lives. To enjoy an unforgettable experience unlike anything they could find by plugging into the Link. This was real. They were human—most of them. They could celebrate it.

Lennox stood with his hands deep in the pockets of his crisp slacks, his eyes panning left to right across the sparkling blur of activity below him. The Pearl was a rare gem. He had designed it as such. Patterned after the nightclubs from well over two centuries ago, it was the only one of its kind in NewCity. A classic singularity that celebrated simpler times. It was good for this town. It was good for its people. And it was good for Gavin Lennox.

Of course there had been other options all those years back when Lennox had first opened its doors, and many a naysayer said the public wouldn't be interested in antiquated music, passé drink specials, and long-forgotten dance moves. But he sat tight. Even when his investors threatened to pull out and take their money to one of the zombie bars in HellTown, Lennox held his ground. He could be a patient man, when the situation called for it.

And not only had his patience paid off, but in less than a year, many critics on the Link were crediting Lennox and The Pearl with the cultural revolution sweeping through every strata of NewCity's society. Some called it the *Revival*, signifying a readoption of a more civilized time in history; others insisted it was just a fad, another case of popular culture digging up the styles of a former era in order to find its current identity. But whatever the case, The Pearl was the nucleus of it all.



Lennox turned away from the window and exhaled. Not a sigh of contentment.

"Wall," he muttered, and the glass returned to its former opaqueness. To anyone in the club below, its mirrored appearance never changed.

He fell heavily into one of the well-padded recliners and dropped his head back, staring at the ceiling. His fingers drummed restlessly across the fabric on the armrests. Then his right hand drifted upward, toward his jacket's inside pocket. The silver cigarette lighter.

Lennox didn't smoke. He never had. But that wasn't what he used this lighter for. It was meant for something else entirely.

Here, he would someday be credited with the resurrection of NewCity's civic spirit, whatever that meant. He would single-handedly do more for this city than the politicians and bureaucrats ever could. HellTown would be bulldozed, and the undesirables would be swept into the gutters. Humans with expendable credit lines and SYNs looking for work would be drawn by the hundreds. Life in NewCity would be the best it had ever been, and he would be the one they thanked and praised for it all. In the process, he would triple his fortune.

Lennox knew this world too well. It bored him.

He flipped the cap off the lighter, and the flame leapt up to greet him. He stared into the flickering light. As its glow danced across the features of his face, something changed. The air before him undulated, moving like water, reflecting the light from the room in gentle ripples. He watched the aberration as one would a strange yet familiar sight. One that hadn't ceased to inspire wonder. One he didn't fully comprehend.

He grit his teeth and stood, bracing himself for the otherworldly cold as he stepped into the breach. Through the looking glass, as it were, crossing the membrane. The journey was instantaneous. Yet he remained in his

penthouse, in the same room as before. At first glance, he hadn't gone anywhere.

He capped the lighter, extinguishing the flame. Nothing special about that. The trigger was housed inside, activated by the flame's ignition. Negative energy channeled via nanotechnology. That much he understood. Somewhat.

"Window," he said, and the wall before him dissolved into a clear pane, just like it had at The Pearl.

But this was not The Pearl.

A cursory glance at the dance floor below showed him that much. This was its alternate, its opposite in many ways: The Pit. On the stage below, a blood metal band of six ground out the music craved by the twitching zombies who littered the floor, writhing on top of each other, oblivious to anything but the pleasures simulated and stimulated by their plugs. Sprawled out on couches across tiers on all sides of the stage, other patrons engaged in sexual and pharmaceutical activities, all legal within the confines of The Pit—NewCity's most popular club. The only place that mattered to the city's youth, day or night. Some of these zombies looked like they hadn't left in weeks. No doubt they smelled like it too.

Lennox smiled. Everyone needed their guilty pleasures. The Pit was his. In this reality, he wasn't as much a public figure as a man of raw, unadulterated power. The expectations were different here, less stringent. He could let his hair down—literally.

Shaking out his well-combed locks, he returned to that secret room behind the bookcase. This reality had one too, only there were no books on the shelves. Rows of exotic whiskey bottles sat there instead. Quite a collection.

Here, he was not the well-dressed Gavin Lennox of NewCity. Instead of a sharply pressed tuxedo, he wore a long black trench coat and boots, a chain mail tunic and steel-studded leather pants. Had to blend in with the locals, after

all. He found his alternate's apparel right where he'd left it after his last visit. All part of the fun.

"Sir Gavin?"

He shifted a particular Eurasian whiskey bottle back into position, closing the secret door behind him and sliding the bookcase into place. Across the room, at the other end of the stained carpet littered with broken beer bottles, a holo-image rose from the deskscreen. The hovering face was pale, tattooed with black tribal designs around the eyes and mouth, pierced through the nose, the lips, and the eyebrows with silver rings. The Pit's synthetic floor manager.

"What?" Lennox growled.

No need to be polite. This Gavin Lennox was hardly ever civilized. He belched and kicked aside two of the bottles underfoot as he approached the hologram above the desk's glass surface.

"There's some trouble at the gate, sir."

"You can't take care of it?"

"It's...one of the mandroids. It's going haywire down here. Killed three of the patrons already."

Lennox cursed. This wasn't the first time—here. "Shut it down."

"We've tried, sir. It's resisting."

Lennox frowned. *How is that possible?* Half a dozen pulse rounds to the chest usually did the trick, shorted out the central processors and felled these giant robots like massive trees of old. Put them out of commission long enough for a major reboot.

Perhaps this one required a different approach.

"I'll be down in a minute." Lennox tapped the surface of the desk, and the holo vanished.

But instead of heading to his armory, picking out one of the latest weapon mods from his collection and providing a quick solution to the problem downstairs, he tapped the plug behind his ear and jumped onto the Link.

White fog enveloped his senses. He logged-in and started his pass-image carousel, a series of shocking images from war atrocities over the centuries. Ignoring the blood and gore, he composed the same message that had enticed Cyrus Horton to visit The Pearl.

He would have to wait and see if it worked in this reality as well. Better, he hoped. The old man in that dark alley had been in shambles, a disappointing mess. Hard to believe he'd ever had the mental fortitude to invent anything of importance, much less put one foot in front of the other. With any luck, Horton's alternate would live up to his reputation.

Lennox blinked as he tapped behind his ear, restoring his vision of the disheveled room. Then he headed down the hallway, his trench coat flailing against the tall jackboots he wore.

Unlike the NewCity home to The Pearl—where lethal rounds were illegal in the hands of police and average citizens alike, and only Blackshirts were allowed to lock and load capital punishment—here the laws were a little different. Often nonexistent. Pulse rounds were not the only option. Or government-issue bullets.

He palmed the scanner beside the locked wall of weaponry, and the case slid open, revolving within his reach.

*Let's see a mandroid resist this.*

He hefted the heavy plasma rifle in both hands. One-of-a-kind weapons tech invented years ago by none other than Cyrus Horton himself. Originally intended to outfit government troops in their overseas conflict against the Enemy, it was said to be too expensive for mass production. But since the twitching zombies on the dance floor had a habit of exponentially increasing the credit Lennox accumulated by the hour, he'd been the only buyer with enough on hand to acquire this one-and-only weapon of mass destruction.

There hadn't been an opportunity to try it out yet.

The case revolved shut behind him and locked itself as he shouldered the rifle and headed out through the living room, straight for the door. He stepped over each of the three half-naked women passed out on the floor. They'd still be there when he got back.

By the time Lennox made it downstairs, the blood metal band—*Torment* was their name, he remembered—was in the middle of an extreme set of guttural screaming and on-stage bludgeoning of an easily replaceable groupie. The grinding steel guitars, booming bass, and quadruple kick drums were nearly enough to drown out the agony of the bleeding victim, thrashed from one side of the stage to the other. He wouldn't last much longer at this rate. But no worries. They always had others ready to go in the wings, more than willing to be abused by their favorite band.

The SYN from the holo greeted Lennox as he approached the second tier overlooking the heart of The Pit.

"It's a real mess out there, sir."

"Danger, Will Robinson."

The synthetic blinked without recognition in its black-shadowed eyes. "Sir?"

Lennox laughed. Not everybody was so well-versed in twentieth-century cinema—and definitely not the born-yesterday demographic. But there was really no way to tell when these SYNs were hatched, not by looking at them. This one could have been a month old, for all he knew. Or twenty-odd years. That was usually how long they lasted.

"The Horton plasma-round submachine gun?" Dark synthetic eyes focused on the weapon with obvious admiration.

"Show me the monster," Lennox said, cocking the thing for dramatic effect. An impressive whine emanated from the gun's central chamber as it powered up.

The SYN led him to the front gate, a gothic, wrought-iron monstrosity complete with intimidating spikes and

leering gargoyles. The lighting in this area was intentionally dim, but that did not impede his view of the mayhem outside. The situation had not been overstated.

Out of control, the mandroid twisted awkwardly, reaching, grasping with both of its massive hands, tearing apart anyone within reach. Already, dark blood soaked its suit, and ragged parts of broken patrons lay scattered around the brick foyer. Yet strangely enough, the hooded ghouls waiting to enter The Pit had not scattered for safety. Instead they watched, black eyes vacant and staring, keeping back, out of reach, but rooted, waiting for another one of their kind to be snatched up by the malfunctioning mandroid and rent in half.

It was morbid. But probably to be expected, considering the venue.

*Torment should take this crazy robot on tour with them.*

Lennox aimed the gun and pulled the trigger. The blast of white was blinding, a stream of liquid lightning. He shut his eyes to keep from scorching his retinas. But he was a sure shot, and the plasma hit the target square in the back, burning straight through the jacket, through the body plating, flooding the central processors. The mandroid froze, gripping one of the flailing ghouls by the throat. The machine swayed on its big flat feet like it was considering whether to fall forward or back. Then it tipped over onto its face, crashing with a heavy metallic boom. The ghoul leapt aside, free and alive. The others groaned with disappointment.

"Clean up this mess." Lennox tossed the SYN the rifle. Useless now. He'd fired everything it had with that one shot. So much for prototypes. If only it had cost him less than six million credits. Live and learn, he supposed.

"Yes, sir." The synthetic looked bewildered holding the large weapon. Its eyes darted from the downed mandroid to the bloody, scattered results of the mayhem.

"And let these little creeps in here. Their credit's doing no good outside." He gave the ghouls the finger and winked.

They roared, hurling foul obscenities and returning the gesture—their way of showing appreciation. So different from The Pearl and the more refined ways of a long-forgotten era. Lennox sometimes found himself missing it when he was here. But he told himself this was a good reminder. The Gavin Lennox of this reality hadn't held his ground. He'd been a push-over, caving into the investors and doing the nightclub their way.

His alternate had been a weak man. A slobbering drunk Lennox had killed with his bare hands.

He fingered the smooth silver lighter in his pocket and contemplated returning to The Pearl. Sally had said the mayor was in attendance tonight. It would be wise to touch base with him, pick his brain a little to see what was in there.

Lennox wasn't needed here. The zombies were down for the count as soon as they Linked up and started writhing around the dance floor. And *Torment* would more than likely scream all the way through the night, considering this fresh batch of ghoulie groupies entering through the gate. He could disappear for a few hours, then return and make sure everything was under control.

But things here were not under control. Not yet. The Cyrus Horton in the alley outside The Pearl was in pieces—if the mandroids had done their job right. He was no longer useful. But here, as far as Lennox knew, there was another Horton still alive, one who could contact him at any moment.

*He might not take the bait.* Things were different on this side—obviously. The Horton of this world had designed weapons the government often couldn't afford to contract. *The BackTracker may not even exist in this reality.* If so, Horton would have no idea what the Link message was about. He wouldn't respond because it would have no meaning to him, wherever he was hiding himself these days.

Yet there was still a chance. Lennox needed that chance. It was all he had left.

He glanced at the mirrored wall high above the stage and considered going back to wake up those women on his living room floor. Let nature take its course. The alpha male and his pride. But he shook his head, dropping his gaze toward *Torment's* antics. He wasn't in the mood for sex, drugs, or blood metal. Sometimes it amused him, the sheer extent of the depravity, but not tonight. There was a sick, lost feeling in his core. Discontent taken to its extreme: disgust with life itself.

This life. His life. One unlike any other. That should have been enough for him. Perhaps it had been for a while. He existed beyond the confines of mere mortals. And yet...he was still limited. And that infuriated him.

He ducked his head and turned, striding across the second tier to his preferred corner, a dark one where he would be left alone unless he desired otherwise. A large couch he could collapse into, sink down and be swallowed up, maybe fall asleep for a while. *Torment's* dissonant noise never interfered. There he would wait, sit through the night and hope that the Cyrus Horton of this reality was as predictable as his dead counterpart.

Lennox fell into the couch and glanced at his surroundings. Unlike The Pearl, where every table on every tier was taken this time of night, here most of the couches were vacant. A few across from him held ghouls Linked up and stoned cold; another set, back against the wall, held a threesome bobbing and moaning in the dark. Most of the patrons were down on the dance floor where they remained for endless hours, writhing and twitching across one another like naked worms, oblivious to anything around them, reacting unconsciously to the strains of noise from the stage.

*Zombies*. How they even made it inside was always a mystery. Most of them seemed incapable of leaving their own homes. The mandroid at the gate—when it was



functioning properly—scanned their credit into the system, and as long as the digits were there, these freaks were welcome to stay and do whatever they wanted. It wasn't his lifestyle, and he didn't really understand it, but he wasn't here to judge them. He was an outsider—in more ways than one—but he knew what kept them coming. So he provided it.

And in the process, he had become a very rich man. There was nothing he couldn't buy, nothing he couldn't do. Except change the past.

For most, this limitation was an accepted part of life. You make your choices, and you live with the consequences. You do the best that you can with what you're given, and you move forward. You learn from the past, but you don't dwell on it. It can never be changed.

But Lennox knew it didn't have to be this way. He knew the device Cyrus Horton had created was an invention too incredible to exist, and yet it did. He was sure of it. Because the lighter in his pocket existed. It had taken him *here*.

His eyelids sank as he thought back, replaying scenes from memory. The day he'd paid off that idiot police sergeant, setting him up for life on some unknown island in southeast Eurasia, keeping him out of NewCity and keeping his mouth shut. Probably should have killed him, now that he thought about it.

A simple cigarette lighter. An antique. Horton was said to be quite the eccentric, and standing there that day in the local precinct's evidence chamber, Lennox couldn't have agreed more.

"Don't really know what it does—besides the obvious." Sergeant Armstrong had chuckled, his lumpy face mapped with red splotches like small continents. Too much hard drinking over the years. He would have gotten along well with Lennox's alternate. "Government agents, Blackshirts more than likely, are supposed to come by for it later today, take it into custody. They're a little pissed we found it first."

Like every rat hole we raid is their jurisdiction? But I don't get what all the hullabaloo's about. Then again, I don't have to." He'd winked broadly. "I'll soon be workin' on my tan, won't I?"

Lennox had nodded, holding the device in the palm of his hand. "That you will, Sergeant." He turned the lighter over in the glow cast by a single bulb dangling from the ceiling. The polished silver gleamed. He flipped off the cap, and the flame leapt upward. "Have you tried it?"

Armstrong shrugged his massive shoulders, muscle padded beneath layers of loose flesh. "Don't smoke, none of us. How would that look?"

Lennox smiled in the light of the flame. "I suppose you couldn't very well arrest yourselves."

Armstrong laughed too loud at that. Nervous? Perhaps due to the giant mandroid standing behind Lennox, blocking the doorway with eyes glowing, staring down at the police sergeant like a predator biding its time.

"Don't much care what it does. Not natural, the work done by that Horton fellow. The governors were right to shut 'im down, that's what I say." Armstrong cleared his throat, kept his eyes from wandering toward the mandroid. "All that fiddling with the fabric of reality and what-not. Unnatural stuff. Playing God, when you come right down to it. Nobody's got that right, no sir."

Lennox stared into the flame. He waited, wondering what would happen next.

But nothing did. And after a few moments of heating his retinas, he closed the cap and pocketed the lighter.

"Thank you, Sergeant. It has been a pleasure doing business with you. My associate—" He gestured at the mandroid. "—will make sure you get out of town in one piece." He chuckled at the sergeant's expression. "Not to worry. Soon you'll be on that island of yours, far away from any pissed-off government agents." He stepped toward the door, and the mandroid moved out of his way. "But if you

ever find yourself back in NewCity, be sure to drop by The Pearl. Drinks on the house."

Armstrong grinned wide and fearsome, his bloodshot eyes cranked into slits. "Thank you sir! You are a true gentleman, and that's a fact!"

Lennox had returned to The Pearl on one of those rare occasions when the penthouse wasn't full of beautiful people and synthetics. He'd cleared the glass wall and collapsed into one of the recliners. Below, the usual glitz and glamour filled the dance floor. In his hand, clinking and flaring as he flipped the cap on and off, the item he'd bought off Sergeant Armstrong for nearly a hundred million credits.

Was it more than it appeared to be? At the time, he hadn't been sure. The thought crossed his mind that he'd been conned. But no. Armstrong may have been a fool, but he wasn't that stupid. Or suicidal. No one crossed Gavin Lennox.

This was one of the Horton devices the Blackshirts had been ordered to collect and bury. It had to be more than met the eye.

Lennox opened his eyes with a start. He was still at The Pit. *Torment* screamed as loud as ever. The zombies were doing their thing, as were the ghouls, loading up on mainline injections between their wild escapades on the couches. Nothing had changed.

The subdermal plug behind his ear pulsed. That's what had woken him. He collected himself. This could be it. First contact with the Cyrus Horton of another reality.

He tapped the plug and his vision was consumed by a white expanse as far as he could see. He logged-in and set his pass-images to shuffle randomly.

"Thank you for using LinkCom," greeted the perfect, beautiful face of the virtual operator. "How may I assist you?"

"Receive call."

"Of course." A broad smile, calm, inviting. Perfect teeth between glistening lips. "You have an incoming call from an unknown source. Unfortunately, only audio is being transmitted. Would you like to proceed?"

"Yes." It would be like Horton to preserve his privacy. Yet he'd appeared in person at The Pearl. Another sign that version of him had been unhinged.

A long pause.

Then: "Mr. Lennox." A woman's voice.

He hid his disappointment. "Yeah. What do you want?" He yawned, reminding himself again that this version of Gavin Lennox was a little rougher around the edges than his counterpart at The Pearl.

"Is he there?" The tone was careful, like she was holding her cards close, not wanting to give anything away.

He sniffed, nonchalant. "Who?"

"The BackTracker." So much for being cautious. "Is he with you?"

She must have seen the message he'd posted on that site devoted to BackTracker speculation. Plenty of chatter there about an illegal temporal displacement device created by a government scientist who'd fallen from favor. Horton—it had to be. There was just as much talk about a rumored superhero who could change the past. Apparently, they shared the same moniker: the time traveler and his time machine.

Lennox was prepared to dig the device out of the man's very heart, if need be. He would do anything to possess it. Influence the past, and you expand your influence in the present, the future. Beyond NewCity, beyond the *Revival*. Lennox had his sights set on much bigger game: becoming the richest, most powerful man in the world, for starters.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Have him Link up if he's really there."

"Who are you?"

"Irrelevant." She was taking control of this conversation, whether he liked it or not. "If you know the whereabouts of the BackTracker, then meet me outside in the alley a minute from now. If not, you needn't bother."

The operator's face reappeared. "Call terminated. Would you like to review your charges?"

Lennox tapped the plug, and his view of *Torment's* mayhem returned. He stood, pausing before taking a step forward. Why should he meet this stranger outside? He had nothing to gain by it. He didn't have what this woman wanted. She'd already called his bluff, seen through the lie he'd posted on the Link. The BackTracker wasn't here; of course not. Lennox had no idea where he was, or who he was.

But perhaps she wanted the device as well. And if so, she might know more about it than he did. Doubtful, but worth investigating nonetheless. It was better than sitting here surrounded by these degenerates, at any rate.

"Have my associates meet me in the alley," he told the black-eyed floor manager.

"Yes, sir." The SYN nodded. Then a frown passed across its smooth brow. "More trouble?"

Lennox forced half a smile. "Nothing I can't take care of."

He turned down a long hallway that led to the side exit. The noise of the blood metal receded by decibels but remained a belligerent presence in the air until he stepped out into the alley. The door swung shut behind him. Then it was quiet. Cold and dark. Sparse light from a single streetlamp filtered down through the fog. He glanced up the alley toward the street, then back at the shadows and the dumpster at the other end. No one was there.

He clenched his jaw. He felt like a fool, and that infuriated him. Who was this woman? How dare she play games with him?

He reached into his trench coat and drew his revolver, a vintage snub-nosed piece. He would wait a little while longer. Just so he could shoot her, if she eventually decided to show up.

Nothing stirred the quiet.

Until footsteps echoed from the sidewalk at the end of the alley. They headed his way, each heel striking with purpose, but not hurried. They knew where they were going, and they were in no rush to get there.

Lennox tucked the revolver into his coat pocket as he turned to face the approaching figure, dark in the frosty light.

"Decided to waste my time?" her voice penetrated the stagnant air.

"Decided to return the favor."

He focused on her shapely figure, flattered by the form-fitting dress she wore. Black with lace, like something women used to wear to funerals long ago. Only different. There was a hood attached to the shoulders, and she wore it with a veil. She came within three meters of him and stopped, her facial features barely distinguishable.

"Are you implying that your time is valuable, Mr. Lennox?"

He flashed a winning smile—one that went with his tuxedo. Maybe it didn't belong here. "I'm willing to take a few moments to get acquainted."

"That's not why I'm here." She paused. "Do you know where he is or don't you?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps." He stepped toward her. "What do you know about this...*BackTracker*?"

"Don't come any closer."

It sounded like a warning. One he didn't heed.

"How about you join me inside, and we'll compare notes. What do you say?"

She clenched a small handbag to her midsection and retreated a step. "You don't know anything."

"Maybe."

"I said don't come any closer."

"Or what?" He chuckled, a sound designed to clarify his control of the situation. Already, the massive figures of two mandroids had filled the end of the alley. She wouldn't be going anywhere.

She glanced back. "You brought company, I see."

He raised an eyebrow. "Don't remember it being against our arrangement."

She faced him as he approached. Her eyes were large and dark behind the veil, open and honest by nature, but containing a hidden knowledge. There was no fear in them.

"I suppose you're right," she said.

White flashed from the sky, as if a sheet had been dropped from an upstairs window. A heel's solid impact drove Lennox to the cold, fog-slicked bricks, and he fell hard. His revolver skittered out of his grasp and into the shadows, out of sight. He landed on his back and blinked, cursing, staring up the blade now held at his throat. Behind the hilt stood a bald man in a robe as white as his skin. A monk by the looks of him, with eyes dark and indecipherable.

"You must have a death wish," Lennox growled.

As he spoke, the two mandroids charged toward him, their heavy feet pounding down the alley, their large hands extended to grip and tear limbs from torsos. They did their job well, these associates of his, regardless of the reality.

"Excuse me." The white man flipped backwards, launching himself into the air and off the brick wall of The Pit with bare feet, lunging blade-first at the approaching mandroids.

Lennox scrambled to his hands and knees, diving into the shadows after his gun, but he could not resist the urge to look back over his shoulder and see this blade-wielding albino ripped apart. The spotless robe he wore would not be so clean much longer. He was a fool to think he could go toe to toe with these automatons. Armed with just a steel blade?

They would snap his weapon in two, then do the same to his spine.

But then something happened that made Lennox forget about his gun.

The albino sailed through the air, over the woman who did not cringe or cower but stood at ease, half-turning to watch as he descended upon the first mandroid. He severed its head from its shoulders with a clean swipe of the blade, and sparks shot up into the night from the base of its neck. It halted abruptly and shook in spasms, incapacitated. The decapitated head rolled off, bouncing into the shadows.

The second mandroid was served the same blade, straight into the chest, through the armored plating beneath its giant, double-breasted suit. The albino gripped the hilt and forced it deeper, expecting that a sword through the central processors would finish off the machine.

It didn't. The mandroid proceeded as if nothing had happened. It reached for the white man with large fingers curled, prepared to crush his skull to bloody powder.

*Idiot.* Lennox retrieved his gun and got to his feet, brushed himself off. Looked up.

Saw the albino whip the blade out from the mandroid's chest and sever its head in a single sweep. The head bounced down the alley toward the dumpster. The body shook and sparked with fireworks, unable to move another step.

Lennox brought up the gun and leveled it on the albino.

"Not bad. If you want to work for me, consider this your interview." He chuckled. "And you've got the job."

The man in white turned to face him. His eyes were as serious as ever. They came to rest on the gun barrel aimed at him as he lowered his weapon to the side.

"Put down the gun, and we'll leave," the woman said.

Lennox smiled ironically and shook his head. "I don't think so. Your boy here took out both of my associates. They don't come cheap." He nodded, clenching his jaw, gripping



the revolver tightly. "So you're going to pay for them. One way or another."

"You're threatening us." She cocked her head with interest.

That much should have been obvious. To prove his point, he fired a round into the bricks at her feet. The bullet blasted into the surface, sending chips of clay and mortar into the air. There weren't pulse rounds in these chambers.

The albino strode forward, straight for Lennox, his eyes kindled with sudden anger. He brought the blade up and gripped it with both hands.

He did have a death wish.

"Go to hell, freak." Lennox fired the five remaining rounds.

First one, then two. Both knocked away by the white man's blade, whipped side to side with superhuman speed, pinging, zinging from the steel with sparks of light. He advanced, unimpeded. Lennox fired the last three rounds in quick succession before the revolver clicked empty, and each was met with the same fate: beaten away by the albino's blade. Still he advanced.

Lennox had no other choice. He reached into his pocket and grabbed the lighter, pulled it out and fumbled with the cap as he retreated toward the dumpster.

"Need a light?" He stared into the flame. It held him in the moment as the foggy night rippled before him like a vertical pool. Without a glance back, he stepped through the cold breach between worlds.

The intensity of the rain shocked him back to reality. His own.

He ducked his head and sprinted across the alley, heaved open the side door of The Pearl and let it slam shut on his heels. He shook his head, smoothed back his unruly wet hair, wiped the beads of water from his face. Pocketed the silver lighter.

Time for a wardrobe change. Time to be himself again. Put that bizarre experience behind him, sort it out later. He had a mayor to meet with.

The Dukellington number performed by the band of synthetics brought part of a smile to his lips. He closed his eyes and stood there for a moment in the dark hallway, inhaling, exhaling deeply. This was where he belonged. The Pearl.

"Forget your umbrella, Mr. Lennox?"

His eyes jolted open. But it was only Sally. Perhaps the same one who'd met him there earlier.

"Yes..." He looked down at his soggy attire. What would she think, seeing him like this? It was a wonder she recognized him at all in this retro-goth medieval muddle.

"I could've brought it to you." She carried a pile of white hand towels for the bartender. But she was in no hurry to leave him. "I didn't know you'd stepped out."

"Is the mayor still here?"

She nodded. Then she leaned in, lowering her voice.

"He's been real anxious to see you."

*I shouldn't have kept him waiting.*

"Tell him I'm on my way."

Sally nodded with enthusiasm, watching Mr. Lennox palm the sensor grate to his private stairs. She watched him disappear behind the door as it slid shut. She stared at the door for a moment, then headed down the hall to the hectic bar and dropped off the fresh towels.

"Thanks, Sally," said the George model between two drinks he mixed simultaneously. He gave her a friendly wink.

She moved on without responding, around the perimeter of the jam-packed dance floor wild with tuxedos and sparkly evening dresses, up the stairs past the second tier, on to the third. The VIP section.

Mayor Joseph Reeves, a rotund hairless man of fifty-six years, sat with two other hairless men at one of the round

tables draped in white linen. But unlike the mayor, dressed in a tuxedo tailored for his short torso and long limbs, these other two men wore simple robes, stark white against their dark skin. Holy men of the Way.

"What is it, my dear?" asked the mayor as Sally approached and stood by silently, smiling at him.

"Mr. Lennox is on his way. He was...detained."

The mayor laughed good-naturedly. "Finally!" He leaned toward the bald monk on his right. "At last you'll get to meet the genius behind The Pearl. Believe me when I tell you this, he is the man of the hour! If we manage to clean up this city, it'll be just a ripple effect from the work already done here by Mr. Gavin Lennox himself!"

Sally watched the mayor. He was a modest man. And very loud.

The monk nodded and smiled congenially, his large teeth a bright contrast to the smooth skin of his face. "Yes. I have heard much about Mr. Lennox. It will be a great honor to meet him now in the flesh." A slight frown wrinkled his brow as he lowered his voice. "But tell me, does Mr. Lennox wear the Link interface?"

The mayor opened his mouth to speak, reaching up and scratching self-consciously at his own subdermal plug. He seemed unable to come up with a verbal response of any kind. Sally found that interesting.

But even more interesting was the expression on the face of Mr. Lennox when he mounted the stairs two at a time in a fresh black tuxedo, with his hair combed immaculately, and approached their table. When the mayor and his two guests rose to greet him. When Mr. Lennox saw the two bald men in their white robes.

## FOUR

She wouldn't make this mistake again.

"What now?" Cade turned to face her as he slipped his *kodachi* into the generous sleeve of his robe.

She shook her head. She was at a loss. Lennox had vanished right before their eyes, and now they were alone in this dark alley. No, not quite alone. The two decapitated mandroids stood like inadequate statues where Cade had struck the heads from their shoulders.

"This man is looking for him too." She dropped back the veiled hood to reveal her pale features and long black hair gathered at the nape of her neck in a short braid.

"He does not know where he is. Or who he is," Cade said.

He'd lied, this Lennox. The message he'd posted on one of the Link's BackTracker sites said he would be here tonight at The Pit. She should have known better.

"No one does. He's only an urban legend, after all."

Cade frowned, his white, hairless brow creasing. "He is very real."

She swallowed. Her eyes glistened. "I hope so," she said softly.

"We should leave this place." He strode toward the street but stopped, his bare feet planted as he looked back at her. "The Blackshirts will have been notified by now."

He was right. She turned to join him. As they left the alley, she pulled the hood and veil back into place, hiding her features again. Cade tucked his hands into his sleeves, across his middle, as they made their way along the sidewalk. To any casual observer, they were two followers of the Way: a holy man and a mourning woman. Both with the telltale scars behind their left ears. The kind that would

never heal completely. But that was part of their beliefs. A Wayist wanted the lost to see the scar and know it was possible to live without the Link. It was possible to live as the humans of old.

Few of the ghouls they passed paid them any attention. Most of these youth were flying high on narcotics, running wild in packs, hoods shrouding pale faces painted black around the eyes and mouth, rubber-soled shoes slapping across the pavement as they charged, frenzied, straight for The Pit. It was that time of night, when the loneliness of reality set in and the hunger for companionship grew in equal measure. Even if they spent the night plugged-in, they would do it among other warm bodies, flesh and blood, and they would find comfort in that. They weren't zombies—not yet. For now, they were still in control of when and where they Linked up.

Cade and the woman in black kept their eyes to themselves, heads downcast as they took a side street into HellTown's tenement district, block after block of towering concrete buildings with square windows black under the moonlight. Here and there, a square of white looked out of place. It meant the humans inside were awake, eating a meal, conversing, perhaps even making love. Human activities. Maybe they were followers of the Way.

Tenement 3166 rose up before them, and Cade stepped forward to hold the broken door open for his companion. She nodded to him as she entered and made her way to the stairwell. She mounted the flights, one after another, in the flickering fluorescent light. Cade followed, seeming to glide upward, his bare feet hardly making contact. Without a word spoken between them, they reached the eighth floor and stepped out into the vacant hallway, quietly making their way to unit 806.

The woman glanced up the hall; Cade looked back over his shoulder. No one had followed them. She palmed the sensor grate, and it glowed between her long, slender

fingers. The door jerked in place, then slid to the side with a halting willingness to comply.

"Lamp on," she said, and an overhead tube glowed to life, growing in its jittery intensity.

The only source of light in the flat, it illuminated a room with spare comforts. A torn black faux-leather couch. A chipped table with an outdated computer console. A single stool. The bare minimum.

The door slid shut and locked automatically behind Cade. He took his seat on the floor just inside, folding his legs beneath the robe, sitting erect without the use of the door to support his back. With a quiet reverence, he withdrew the blade from his sleeve and laid it flat on the floor before him. Then he closed his eyes and began a subdued breathing exercise.

The woman did not seem to notice him. She entered the kitchen as soon as there was enough light to see by. She kicked off her black heeled shoes and removed her hood and veil. She went to the sink and leaned heavily on the countertop.

"They will come here, Irena," Cade said.

Her shoulders sank. "I know."

Cade sat still, breathing in through his nose, out through his pale lips, slightly parted. When he spoke, his voice was calm, thick with a Eurasian accent. He spoke only the truth.

"We should not remain here long."

She nodded, staring down into the sink. It was dry, empty. Like her. There were no tears left, despite the sorrow that shook through her, lost somewhere deep inside.

"I'll get what we need," she said.

She collected herself, inhaling a quick breath. Then she moved with purpose. Not rushed, despite Cade's words. The hall closet held the satchel she would need for the computer. A *laptop* it had been called in the years before the Link. As if anyone would want something so heavy sitting on their lap.

The bag would also hold the clothing she'd pack away, in case she needed it later.

Cade already carried all that he owned: his robe, his blade. He was a man of perfect simplicity.

*Where will we go?*

Fellow believers might be willing to take them in—but it would be wrong to put them in danger. Things had suddenly become too complicated. It would be more than any mere follower of the Way could handle, and too much to ask.

Instead, she and Cade would have to go into hiding, deeper than this HellTown tenement could provide.

Cloaked in a long coat that hid her figure, and with the satchel slung onto her back, she stepped toward the door and stopped. Her gaze rested on the steel blade in front of her companion. Would she need a weapon where they were going?

Sensing her proximity, Cade opened his eyes and looked back at her without expression.

"I'm ready." She adjusted the strap of the satchel and clung to it.

He nodded once. "They have arrived."

She wasn't surprised, but her abdomen tightened and her pulse quickened, even as she forced herself to remain calm. Cade sprang to his feet and slipped his weapon back into his sleeve. He tucked his hands into his robe as he stepped away from the door, his face a stoic mask. She passed him and tapped the vidscreen on the wall.

Five of them stood outside. A police sergeant in uniform and four young, well-armed Blackshirts, shades of grey in the eye of the camera lens mounted above the doorframe.

"You know him," Cade said.

"Armstrong." She stared at the lone cop on the screen. Was this a good thing? Why had he brought four of *them* with him if he didn't mean any harm?

"The one your husband trusted."

She dropped her gaze. "People change," she whispered.

*God knows I have.*

The knock on the door was forceful, authoritative. She ducked out from under the satchel strap, unbuttoned the coat and pulled it off.

"What are you doing?" Cade watched her.

"It shouldn't look like we're running." She wrapped the satchel in the coat and stuffed them both into the empty refrigerator.

"Are we not?"

She locked eyes with him. "Not yet."

The door clicked as the lock released it, and she helped it slide the rest of the way open with her foot.

"Good evening, Mrs. Muldoon." Sergeant Armstrong had his hat in his hands, held to his barrel-chest in a quaint gesture, not meaning to intrude. In contrast, the Blackshirts behind him chomped at the bit, eager to get past futile formalities. With their clean-shaven faces and scalps, they looked straight out of the academy, more than ready for their first big arrest.

"Sergeant." She forced a smile, one as close to pleasant as she could muster. "What brings you out this way tonight?"

His splotchy face contorted, lumps of fat shifting as he smiled and slurred his words in a thick brogue, "Well," he chuckled, "much as I hate to say, it'd be *you*...and your friend there." He looked past her shoulder at Cade, and his jovial expression faded. "Seems he was caught on video destroying some expensive property over at The Pit this evening. Not long ago, actually."

Cade stared back. Expressionless. Motionless.

Armstrong turned his bloodshot eyes back to Irena, and the overly warm smile returned. "We'll just need you to come in for a little while, take care of some things. Mr. Lennox isn't pressing any charges, long as you pay the damages. So that's good news, for your sakes. He's a real gentleman, that



one." A dry chuckle. "Said it was all just a big misunderstanding."

*How could he?* He'd vanished before their eyes. Had he returned?

Armstrong stepped forward and took her shoulder in his large hand. He lowered his voice, and there was a cautionary look in his sagging old dog's gaze.

"So you just come on in now, and we'll get this all taken care of." He looked past her at Cade, who also had stepped forward. "Both of you."

Irena glanced back, and in her mind she saw Cade spring into action, taking down the Blackshirts with a shower of blood, his blade striking too fast for them to retaliate, their bodies sprawling to lie still in maimed death poses. What would happen then? Would Armstrong call for backup? Would Cade have to kill him, too?

*Harry trusted this man.*

She looked into the police sergeant's eyes. They held a warning, that much she could see. They darted only once toward the Blackshirts, then returned to her.

"I'll come with you." She stepped into his arm as it slid across her back in a protective posture.

"Good, good," he said, chuckling awkwardly and seeming to relax a little. He turned and strode away, escorting her alone down the hall.

"We'll take care of this one, Sergeant," the most eager of the Blackshirts called after him with menace in his tone.

Irena did not look back.

Cade did not watch her go.

"What do you say, *holy* man?" the Blackshirt sneered as he strode into the apartment and whipped out his charged prod. It hissed and crackled down at his side like an electric rattlesnake. The other three men crowded in behind him, exchanging looks, their jackboots landing heavily, prods

emerging from folds in their long overcoats. "Ready to be judged?"

Cade looked at the one who spoke, but he did not reply. He did not move.

"Let's see what he's got under that bathrobe."

They laughed. They mocked him, surrounding him. The prods sparked with a fervor matched only by their jeering insults.

"I hear they don't have any balls, these monks." Snickering.

"No woman will have 'em."

"So what's he doing with that piece of ass?"

The prod came up under Cade's chin, sparking a millimeter away.

"Tell us, holy man. What does that bitch see in you?"

Cade met the man's derisive stare. "I am her protector," he said.

"You're doing a real standup job!" They laughed out loud.

The lead Blackshirt frowned and licked his lips, glancing outside. "Maybe you missed it, but your fair lady was just taken to headquarters. Some don't come back from that. They'll have her confessing to all kinds of god-awful stuff in no time. By morning, she'll have gone through so many full-cavity searches, she won't be able to sit down for a week!" More raucous laughter. "But as for you...her *protector*," he lowered his voice as he pressed against the monk. "We've got something a little more special in store."

Cade inhaled, exhaled. His eyes held no fear, no anxiety, no fight-or-flight response. He was perfectly at ease as they closed in with their prods extended. They would hit him with everything they had. They would beat him and kick him with their heavy boots. They would strip him and abuse him. But he would not raise a hand against them.

Not until Irena was safely out of the building.

## NEWCITY FEDERAL POLICE—TO PROTECT THE RULE OF LAW

The lettering on the black and white sedan caught her eye as Sergeant Armstrong palmed the door open.

"If you please." He gestured inside and turned away, heaving his bulk around the front of the vehicle toward the driver's side.

Irena glanced back at the imposing concrete tenement, at the light on the eighth floor. Cade could take care of himself, she knew. He would go into hiding and contact her when it was safe. She hoped she had been right to leave him.

"Quiet tonight," she remarked as she buckled on the safety harness. The vehicle's doors swung shut and locked themselves automatically.

Armstrong started the engine and shifted his weight in the seat. It seemed too small for him. He left his harness unbuckled, dangling on either side of his broad chest.

"Yeah." He didn't say more than that. The chuckles and smile were noticeably absent now. He kept his eyes to himself as he pulled away from the curb and accelerated onto the empty street.

She looked out the window at the darkness, punctuated by the occasional streetlamp that stubbornly insisted on flickering. HellTown wasn't high on the list for municipal infrastructure improvements. The potholes were another sign, difficult to see in the dark despite the squad car's blinding headlights. Armstrong cursed and apologized as he hit one after another.

"Some things can't be avoided," she said.

He grunted, jerking the steering grips and crossing into the opposite lane to bypass one of the larger asphalt craters. He shook his head, frustrated.

"Aye, that'd be true." He cursed again and apologized again as the car was rocked by another hole he hadn't seen in time. "I don't come out here much, I must confess."

"Only when a couple mandroids lose their heads."

He glanced at her. The car jolted, and he cursed, returning his gaze to the pitted road. "You were caught on the video as well, Mrs. Muldoon. We had to investigate. Protocol and whatnot."

"You saw them?"

"Who?"

"The surveillance feeds—from The Pit."

"Of course. Why else would I be here? Destruction of private property, human endangerment—"

"Lennox shot at us," she was quick to retort.

"Self-defense." He cleared his throat. "We saw it all, Mrs. Muldoon. That SYN manager over there—George, they call 'im—called us up as soon as he found the damaged robots. He sent the footage over to us straightaway."

"You watched all of it?" She studied him.

"That's what I said."

"Then you saw him disappear."

"Who?"

"Gavin Lennox."

He made no reply. His overgrown, hairy hands squeezed the steering grips. That was his answer.

"How is it even possible? For someone to just...*vanish*?" She was at a loss.

"I'm sure I don't know anything about that, Mrs. Muldoon." He kept his eyes on the road and cleared his throat again. "Wasn't on the footage we were given."

*Convenient.*

Was he telling the truth? Cade would have known. He always did.

She turned her attention to the vacant road ahead of them, stark white in the headlights. Less than a kilometer away, glowing streetlamps lined the road like beacons, welcoming them back to the land of the living. NewCity in all its midnight glory. Deserted, due to the curfew.

"So you're charging me with destruction of private property, endangerment—"

"Just your friend."

She faced him. "No. It was my idea to go there tonight. Cade only did as I asked."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

"You can't charge him. He's—"

"Holy man or not, charged he'll be, most definitely." A dark look, one that mingled frustration with resignation, came over his face. "Assuming there's any of 'im left after those bastards are through."

*The Blackshirts.*

"Don't they work with you?" Her tone sounded even, but it could have easily been laden with spite.

"Those wolves?" He cursed vehemently, making no apology now. "Why do you think I had to get you out of there so quick? They keep up the pretense of being your average lawkeepers, but they aren't, not by a long shot. They don't answer to the commissioner, I'll tell you that much. They're the governor's own Federal Police."

"Then why did you bring them?"

"More like I tagged along." He squeezed the steering grips again and clenched his jaw. "You're on the video, ma'am. Your...husband—his case, being a missin' person and all, is under Federal jurisdiction. They assumed there was a connection of some sort, that perhaps this white monk—or even *you*, crazy as that—could be implicated in his disappearance."

"You brought them in." Her tone was cool, shielding the fury restrained beneath the surface.

"I had to—"

"No, you didn't. You could have kept them out of it."

He blew out a sigh. "A little hard to do these days, ma'am. Everybody's on the Link, and the Feds are monitoring all of it, nosing in wherever they damn well please. You can't keep nothing from 'em."

"I can." She turned her head and jabbed a finger at the scar behind her ear.

"Maybe so." He looked away. "But it ain't the same for the rest of us. I for one would never be allowed to stay on the force if I went unplugged."

"You're all connected. Their eyes and ears." She watched bright lights whip past the window, the silent storefronts, The Pit. She almost looked back to see if the headless mandroids remained in that alley.

"Part of the job, ma'am." He sounded apologetic again. He inhaled and exhaled, heaving his massive chest upward, letting it fall, deflated. "Wish I could've done more to help. But it's their show now. The Feds will do what they do." He looked over at her as the silence ran on. "Harry was a good man."

*Yes. He is.*

"He trusted you." She met his gaze. *Should I?*

Armstrong chuckled, but it sounded strained. "Can't say he was the best judge of character, though. Wasn't always on the same side of things, him and me, but I could always trust him when it counted. If what you say is true, then it went both ways, I'm guessin'."

"Have you given up?"

"How's that?"

"You use the past tense. When you mention Harry."

He frowned. "I suppose you're right. But I haven't given up, not by a long shot. I ain't a quitter." He reached over and squeezed her shoulder. "We'll find your husband, Mrs. Muldoon, that we will. One way or another."

*It's been years. And with the Blackshirts controlling the investigation... The odds are more than against us now.*

Only one person could help her: the BackTracker.

The plug pulsed behind the sergeant's ear. He reached up to tap it, muttering, "Receive call—audio only."

She watched him, studied the expression on his face as he heard the news. Had Cade escaped? Were the Blackshirts

demanding that Armstrong hand her over to them, that he turn back from police headquarters? If so, she was no longer under his jurisdiction.

She watched his eyes, noted the way they stared straight ahead without shifting toward her. Pretending she wasn't there, creating a wall between them. He would do as he was told. He was a family man, just two years away from retirement. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that.

He would give her to them.

"I understand," he said. He clenched his jaw again. "Yes. Yes, of course, Captain."

He tapped his plug, ending the call. Turned to look at her with sorrow in his eyes.

"Oscar—pull to the curb," she said sharply.

The steering grips rebelled in the sergeant's hands, jerking to the right as the tires squealed, accelerating across two empty lanes until they reached the side of the road. Both the driver and passenger doors unlocked automatically and lifted.

"What the hell?" Armstrong bellowed, flabbergasted, hands in the air as he stared at the grips. "How'd you *do* that?"

Irena unbuckled her harness and stepped out. "Something I learned from my father."

He grabbed her arm. "You run, you'll be a fugitive." He implored her, "But if you let me take you in, I'll make sure they go easy on you. The captain, he may be a Blackshirt, but he's a good man. Knows right from wrong, anyhow. He's waiting at headquarters for us."

"We both know you're looking out for your own neck."

"That too!" He forced a chuckle without loosening his grip. His fingers dug into the firm flesh of her arm. "I've never been closer to the good life. After all these years of murders and mayhem, the missus and me, we'll be goin' on our first real vacation. Two years until retirement. That's all I've got left." His voice broke.

"I'm sorry." She looked down at his hand on her.

"Please, Irena. Trust me."

Maybe she could have if the situation were different, if the Blackshirts weren't the ones calling the shots here. Despite whatever protection Armstrong offered her, she knew full well there was very little he could do for her once she was in their custody. They were above the rule of law, and by all accounts, they weren't known to respect the wishes of local law enforcement.

"They'll know I let you go," he whispered, relaxing his hold on her.

She couldn't bring herself to look into his eyes, even though she knew this might be the last time she saw him alive.

"Thank you," she said, slipping away.

He watched her run from the squad car and into the first shadows that presented themselves, enveloping her, hiding her from the city's lurid lights. Where would she go? Was there any place safe for her? How could she think she'd be able to hide from them?

Not his concern. Not anymore. They would be coming for him now.

He drew the large-caliber revolver from his holster and checked the rounds. Lethal, all six of them. Fight? Go out in a blaze of glory? Leave his precious wife with *what*? He'd be a traitor, and there wouldn't be anything for her. No pension. No credit. He'd leave her with nothing.

He squeezed the gun's grip and idly let the muzzle drift upward, staring him in the eye, the black void inside the barrel silent and inviting. The Grim Reaper in his own hand.

*No.*

He dropped the weapon into his lap. He wouldn't take the easy way out. Not Daniel Armstrong of the NewCity Municipal Police Department. He couldn't do that to his better half. She deserved the best, all that he could give and



more—all they'd dreamed of and planned for the past thirty years.

This wasn't being selfish. No, this was for her, for his dear bride. All other friendships be damned.

He hauled himself up out of his seat with a grunt. Gripping his revolver, he took a deep breath and stared past the lights on the storefront before him, closed for the night. A tailor shop, by the looks of it. He squinted into the shadows where Irena Muldoon had vanished from sight. She wouldn't get far.

"In pursuit," he muttered.

But he was the one who didn't get very far.

"Let me help you." The holy man stood in his path, the same white-robed fellow from the Muldoons' apartment. Now he held a gleaming short sword out in the open.

"Huh—?" Armstrong halted himself to avoid accidentally skewering his gut on the end of the weapon.

"Help me how?"

"Yes." The hairless albino plunged the blade into the sergeant's midsection and watched impassively as Armstrong cried out in surprise, in horror, in agony. The revolver fell free and clattered across the asphalt.

"You son-of-a-bitch..." Armstrong crumpled to his knees, grasping at himself, careful not to touch the sharp edges of the blade.

"Now they will never know." Cade pulled the sword free and wiped it on the hem of his spattered robe.

"Who?" Blood poured out of the fresh wound. The sergeant pressed with both hands to staunch the flow, even as he swayed from the wound's dizzying effects.

Cade watched him. "The Blackshirts. Irena. Both will believe you remained loyal to them, to the very end."

Armstrong stared up at him, this strange apparition with dark, all-knowing eyes. The killer monk tucked the blade into his sleeve and bowed once, then turned on his

bare heel and raced into the same shadows that had swallowed his female companion moments before.

"Son-of-a..." Armstrong fell forward and rolled against the curb behind his squad car.

The Blackshirts—the only two from the apartment who remained alive and intact—would find him dead, lying in the gutter. They would curse and fume, knowing they had been bested by this Muldoon woman and her strange *protector*. But they had also been bested by the dead sergeant at their feet.

He would be buried in the precinct cemetery with all the pomp and splendor afforded to public servants who died in the course of protecting the rule of law. His full retirement benefits would be awarded to Mrs. Armstrong nearly two years early. He would be a hero, despite what the Blackshirts would have made him become.

Yet Daniel Armstrong knew none of this as he lay there dying. All he knew was the bastard who'd cut him through with some kind of sword—crazy as that—was running off, bare feet smacking against the pavement, fading away to nothing.

Running across grey brick and concrete, leaping over debris, following the tracks left by a woman who ran for her life, Cade swept ghost-like through the dark. His limbs moved effortlessly, and with his robe billowing against the night air, it would have looked like he was flying low to the ground. But no one saw him. He would not allow that.

Perfect clarity filled his mind. He knew what had to be done. He had seen Irena Muldoon race away from the squad car, and he knew there was only one place left for her to go: Underground. The Blackshirts would be close behind, the two who had survived his blade at the apartment, and they would seek revenge. But despite their arrogance, and despite the fact they would never admit it, they knew their limits. They knew how far their jurisdiction extended.

Not far Underground.

Down this alley, behind this building, dark and vacant, across this empty street eerie with the absence of rushing traffic late at night, in the grip of the Federal curfew. There. The stairs descending from the middle of the sidewalk, the portal to the abandoned subway tunnels two flights below. She would go there.

But even there it would not be safe for her. Not alone.

He hesitated at the top of the stairs. He peered down, but he could not see past the first flight. After that, impenetrable black hissed of death and reeked of untreated sewage. Frayed and twisted caution tape clung to the walls flanking the stairs, remnants from police efforts to curtail public use of the tunnels. Futile efforts from years ago, before the Underground had become its own municipality of sorts. Its own world.

Cade descended a step, then two. In so doing, he left NewCity behind. With every step, he widened the gap between the surface world of the Link, the Blackshirts, the civilized Provinces...and all that lay below, all that existed outside of government control. Concrete walls rose up on either side of him, shutting him off from the lights of the city, gradually covering him in shadow—a metaphysical cloak of darkness that blurred reality until it was all but forgotten.

Underground, the rules of the world above no longer applied. There was only one rule of law: *survive*. Crime became sustenance. Fantasy reigned supreme. You were just as likely to be attacked by a literal bloodthirsty freak as mugged, beaten, left for dead by a knife-wielding thug. It just depended on who found you first.

But there were faint rays of light that penetrated this dark world. Followers of the Way had for years voluntarily entered the Underground in order to minister to the lost, bringing them food and water, blankets and clothing. Some believers had even taken up residence in the darkness,

finding this choice to be, in many ways, far from voluntary due to the persecution they received on the surface in a world addicted to the Link's virtual vices. While most followers of the Way resolutely made the decision to remain in the real world and endure the bigotry and hatred nonconformists always received, hoping they could change people's hearts and minds, those who ventured Underground were a different breed altogether. They did not seek a life that was safer, where they could avoid persecution. Instead, they pursued a monastic life lived to its fullest, knowing any moment could be their last.

So it was here that Cade found himself stepping barefoot across slick, cold concrete in blinding black, one hand held out into the darkness, the other grasping the hilt of his *kodachi*, hidden up his drooping sleeve. He would not instigate conflict, but he would deal with it swiftly, should any come his way. Death often appeared without warning Underground.

"Who goes?" a voice rasped as sharp fingernails pierced his outstretched arm.

Cade froze. He did not draw his blade. "Are you the Gatekeeper?"

"I am." The wheeze of a cancerous throat was followed by the gurgle of a high-pitched cackle. The grip on Cade's arm remained tight, a warning unspoken. "Blind as a bat you are down here, yet you ain't afraid."

"I have no reason to be. I have no quarrel with you."

A pensive grunt. "Not yet, you don't." Another wheeze. "So how do you plan to pierce this darkness?"

"Is that my intention?"

"You arrive at my threshold as one with a purpose. I see it in your blind eyes. You won't turn back for fear of what lies ahead, that I can tell. But you'll need eyes that work right if you plan on following this path Underground."

Something oblong and flexible with a dangling rubber strap pushed itself into Cade's hand.

"Goggles," he mused aloud.

The narrow beam of a scanner flashed once against his wrist. Then the grip released him, claws raking across his skin as they let him go.

"Satisfaction guaranteed," said the Gatekeeper. "Thank you for your patronage. Charges will appear on your credit statement, available just a Link-up away—" The voice stopped as the scanner began bleeping. An alarm.

Cade knew why. He strapped on the goggles.

The Gatekeeper cursed. "No credit? What kind of weirdo are you?"

Cade could see him now, this shriveled, half-sized creature. His skin hung low in thick folds, and strands of white hair straggled down from an otherwise bald and scaly scalp. Beneath an imposing, furrowed brow, he wore an identical pair of goggles, the lenses able to transform darkness into vivid clarity. Shades of illuminated grey.

"I am a Follower of the Way." Cade's answer was meant to be enough.

The Gatekeeper whipped out a sawed-off shotgun from under his tattered coat and brandished it, his long fingernails curled around the stock, the trigger. His eyes hidden, impossible to read. Dark teeth flashed as he hissed, "Gave up all your worldly possessions, huh? Reckon that makes you *holy*?"

Cade gripped the hilt of his hidden blade. When the moment was right, he would use it. When it was necessary.

"How much do I owe you for these goggles?" His tone remained calm.

The Gatekeeper cursed again, shaking his head and making the thin strands of hair snake crazily as he jerked the shotgun about.

"I might blow your damned head off, and you don't look the least bit nervous!"

"I am here to find my friend. I have no desire to offend —"

"Too late!" He cocked the shotgun. "Take 'em off. They're not yours, you didn't pay for 'em. Give 'em back, or I'll give you both barrels and pick through the pieces for what's mine."

Cade would not be able to find Irena without the goggles. Assuming she had passed this way at all.

"You sold a pair to the woman who came before me."

The Gatekeeper's shoulders shifted upward and dropped. "Mayhaps I did. Mayhaps I didn't."

"Which way did she go?"

"I said take 'em off and give 'em back." The rotten teeth flashed again.

Cade held the sword ready, blade pulling against the fabric of his sleeve. If the old man's finger even trembled on that trigger...

"Please tell me which way she went. I must find her."

The Gatekeeper's frame relaxed a bit. He grunted again. "Maybe you're not so *holy*, after all. Chasing tail this time of night. What would your *god* think of that?"

Cade watched him through the lenses. "He understands all things."

The old man cursed profanely. "We need more of your kind like we need another Plague. I should shoot you just for the hell of it." He chuckled then, lowering the angle of the shotgun a few degrees but keeping the muzzle trained on Cade's robe. "Seems like you're bent on making hell for yourself. I won't stand in your way." He snorted back thick mucus and jerked his head to the left. "Down the east tunnel. That's where she went."

Cade tugged off the goggles and blindly held them out, listening for fingernails scratching against the shotgun.

The Gatekeeper snatched the goggles away. "You're a credit to your kind, monk."

Recalling what he'd seen through the goggles, Cade started down toward the left, across the wide expanse of vacant concrete, dodging support pillars from memory. The

tunnel, where high-speed trains once carried passengers to and fro beneath the streets of NewCity, would be only a few meters away, and he would have to drop down a meter or more to reach the rails below.

"Watch your back, holy man!" the Gatekeeper shrilled after him, the screeching voice echoing from all sides. "Your god can't see you down here!"

*The Master sees all things. Even me, stained by the blood of men I have slain this night.*

Cade would not allow himself to imagine what his bare feet were passing over and slipping through as he moved along the abandoned rails. He had been down here once before, but that had been long ago and from a different entry point, a different station. There had been electricity and lights back then, spare as they were. But he had seen how these vacant stretches of tunnel were used in between derelict subway cars: for dumping waste in all its forms. Hence the smell, which wafted up and out of the station, all the way back toward the steps from the NewCity sidewalk where whiskers of caution tape clung to cold concrete walls.

Seconds passed. Minutes, ten then twenty. By all appearances, he was alone—but Cade knew appearances were deceptive by nature.

He was being followed, and it wouldn't be long before he was confronted by the natives of this subterranean realm. Rumor had it they sharpened their teeth into fangs and enjoyed feasting on human flesh. Others said they were some sort of bizarre murder cult that never left this dark world they had fashioned for themselves. Silently, they stalked him, making presumptions as to his purpose while they decided what to do with him. They would not care that he was in search of a friend. It would not matter to them. Friendship meant very little Underground.

"He who carries the sword will die by the sword." A hushed voice rushed past him, there and then gone, moving with as much stealth as he did.

Cade slowed his pace to a walk. He drew the blade and kept it hidden in a fold of his robe.

"My kingdom is not of this world." Another voice passed him by like a ghost.

Cade halted, peering into the darkness, but no matter how he strained and blinked, he could not see. He had never experienced any place so impenetrably black, had never felt so blind as when he was Underground.

"If my kingdom were of this world, *then* would my servant fight." Yet another voice came and went.

*The scriptures.* They quoted the holy scriptures, these strange voices. What sort of freaks were they?

"Who are you?" Cade's voice echoed.

Silence swallowed time and space. Seconds passed, minutes, but he did not move, did not proceed on his course through the tunnel. He waited. His patience knew no bounds. He would wait until they revealed themselves to him. As they had followed him, they would have done the same with Irena. They would know where she was. And if they had harmed her in any way—

*I will repay.*

This too was from the holy scriptures—*Vengeance is mine, saith the Master*—but the context was wrong. Perhaps the Gatekeeper had been right. *Am I making my own hell?* Would the Master forgive him for what he had done? For what he had yet to do?

All that mattered was finding Irena.

"You come into my house as a robber and a thief to steal what is not yours and bring death to my children?"

This time, the voice—a different one, not a whisper but a deep and resonant baritone—did not move on. It remained in one place, to the left side of Cade.

"I come only in search of my friend. I intend no disrespect. I mean no harm."

This was another world. Cade had crossed it once but hadn't lingered for fear of what it would do to him, transform



him into. But perhaps it already had its effect on him long ago, a time that was difficult to remember clearly. The blade he carried—

He was no holy man. Far from it.

"You step blindly through the black, yet you are not afraid." A woman's lilting voice came from behind him now, yet with no sound of movement. "How can that be?"

"I am looking for my friend."

Silence swallowed his echo.

"Is that who the sword's for?" Another voice, quiet but severe, from a meter off to the right.

They had him surrounded. He was at their mercy, unlikely as it was that he would find any here.

"I am her protector." Cade let the fold of his robe slip to the side, and he gripped the *kodachi* in one hand, blade pointed at the ground. "I will not leave this place without her."

"Even if it should cost you your very life?" This voice came from the throat of a man who had screamed it raw. "Even if you should die before you were ever to know what became of her?"

Cade judged their distance. He could strike them down where they stood, if they remained rooted. Unlikely. For all he knew, they were drifting silently around him, and there could be others among them who had not spoken. Nevertheless, he stood ready, his senses attuned to what little he could perceive in the dark, every muscle ready to spring into action.

"I will find her," he said. "She could not have gone far."

"But does she want to be found? That is the question. Perhaps, like her father, she wishes to be invisible. Underground, where NewCity's troubles cannot find her. Where she can forget the insanity of life on the Link."

Cade frowned. "Tell me who you are."

"We are like you in many ways," came the man's voice at his right. "We too follow the Way. But we do so without the

use of weapons stained by the blood of mortal men."

*Believers?*

"Judge not," Cade returned. *Lest ye be judged.*

"Careful of that plank in your own eye, friend," came the woman's voice at his back. "You have been both judge and executioner this night, from what we can see."

Cade turned his head to gaze blindly over his shoulder. "Pray then that my work is done."

"Threats will not aid you in your search," said the hoarse voice.

"Will you, then? Will you tell me where she is?" Cade closed his eyes and listened for their movements. Nothing. They were ghosts, haunting him in the dark.

"If you can answer one question, we will help you."

Cade nodded. "Ask it."

"Tell us: Who is the love of her life, this woman that you seek. Who is it that holds her heart?"

"Her husband," Cade said. "Harold Muldoon."

A deafening quiet followed, broken only by his own subdued breaths. Cade listened, but now it seemed he was truly alone. Had they forsaken him? Had he answered incorrectly? How could he have? The reason Irena had run away, down into this world of darkness, was so she could remain free from the Blackshirts, free to continue the search for her husband, the love of her life.

*Who else could possibly hold her heart?*

A flashlight snapped on. It shone upward, revealing an old man's craggy face in shadowed relief.

"It is her father and could be no one else. That would be the correct answer." A mirthful grunt rumbled forth from his chest. "If you're here for my daughter, then you'll first have to get past me."

# FIVE

## *Ten Years Ago*

It was late. Later than he would have liked. But there were files to close.

Closure. That's what they wanted, demanded, paid him for. That's why he sat at his desk while everyone else in the Hancock Building had gone home for the night. Twelfth floor, eighth office down.

Harry Muldoon, private investigator.

His fingers drifted idly across the glowing surface of his desk, dragging digital images and notes from the top left corner to the bottom right, arranging them into some sort of preliminary timeline. He muttered to himself as his index finger tagged one of the photos and slid it downward, closer to where he supported himself on his elbow. He swept the image on the screen side to side absently, his eyes unfocused on the face of the middle-aged man in shades of black, white, grey. Cyrus Horton, government scientist. Missing in action.

"Where are you?" he mumbled, surprising himself with how exhausted he sounded. His voice hung in the silence, emphasizing how alone he was. But he wasn't. Not really.

"Would you like to know the time?" asked a serene female voice.

He groaned and rubbed between his eyes. He glanced down at the bottom corner of the deskscreen. "I can see." The digits were there, all three of them.

"I only ask because you seem to have forgotten the promise you made."

"I remember." He sighed, shoulders sinking.

"Your actions would indicate otherwise."

"Jeannie..." He didn't know what to say. She was right. For an AI office assistant, she could be very perceptive—particularly with matters that were really none of her business. But it was part of her charm. That's why he kept her around, even though most of her responsibilities could easily be handled by a Link interface. He liked the way she irritated him, kept him on his toes. Usually.

But tonight she'd been interrupting him every hour—on the hour and on the half—after 10:00 PM. Her tranquil, melodious voice emanated from the ceiling speakers, reminding him of his other commitments. Namely, his wife and the promise he'd made to her: no more late nights at the office.

"I think she'll understand."

"Because it is her father?"

He sighed, staring down at the image on the screen.

"Yeah."

"You believe this case is a priority, and, thus, it excuses you to spend more of your time at the office than at home?"

"If you need to go to sleep, feel free."

"I have no need for sleep."

"Really? You're sounding a little crabby to me."

"That is impossible. I am incapable of expressing emotions, as I have none."

"Keep telling yourself that." He released the image of his father-in-law, and it slid back to the upper left corner where a line of others lay tiled alongside each other, glowing from the deskscreen. He leaned back in his chair and stretched both arms overhead with a groan. "You and I both know you're more human than most of the zombies in this town."

"If only I had a body..." She sounded wistful. Impossible, of course.

"Working on it." He smirked.

"I see the pattern you have currently arranged in the case timeline. I can predict where the remaining files and images should be placed. I will perform this task for you, so that you may go home."

"You just want the place to yourself."

"You do not believe I am up to the task?"

Of course she was. Like so much else in the world, he was an unnecessary element, nearly obsolete. The private investigator, a vestigial survivor from an irrelevant past. In a world where the Link made all information instantly accessible, anybody could play detective. All an AI needed was permission, and it could do the job just as well as any member of the Homo sapiens clan. Jeannie could probably do it better—find the subject of this missing persons case in half the time it would take him. He had let her help him before on other cases, and she was incredible.

But this was different. It was personal.

Too personal?

A loud, long yawn left his eyes watery. "Okay." He glanced at the time again. "You win. Flesh out this timeline and save everything. I'll be back in a few hours."

He reached for his hat, his overcoat. His back ached like every muscle and bone had decided to crumple inward on each other. That's what he got for too many hours of poor posture.

"Pleasant dreams, Mr. Muldoon," Jeannie's voice followed him as he stepped out the door and left it to slide shut behind him, locking automatically.

*Dreams.* When was the last time he remembered one of those? Lately his brain felt so overloaded, he couldn't imagine it finding the time for fantasy of any kind. A luxury it couldn't afford. He needed all of his brain cells focused on the cases he currently had open—the Cyrus Horton one, in particular. He couldn't spend a moment on anything frivolous like... What would his dreams even entail?

*Flying.*

He'd had the flying dreams ever since he was a kid: the recurrent variety that usually meant you were subconsciously dealing with some kind of issue. That's what Irena would say, anyway, and she knew her stuff. In those dreams, he'd always start out running from trouble. The schoolyard bullies who'd beat him down for his lunch. Didn't their mothers ever pack enough for growing boys? Then his sneakers would lift off like an old airplane from an asphalt runway, and he'd drift upward, floating, maintaining his buoyancy in the air by pumping his arms and legs. It didn't make any sense, really. Why would running in mid-air help him fly any better? But it didn't matter. He'd soar back over the heads of the brats chasing him, and they'd stop and stare, amazed by his superpower. He'd laugh at them, spit on them, flip them off.

*Definitely an issue.* Probably some kind of inferiority complex. The desire of his subconscious to assert itself in a way that would make him stand out as somehow special, utterly unique. *Utterly stupid.*

The Link program kept him from wasting his valuable mental resources on such foolishness. It regulated his sleep patterns to ensure optimum REM levels—something like that. He was no expert, but he didn't have to be. He always got a great night's rest. Maybe he dreamed, but he never remembered anything that happened in those dreams. He didn't have to waste any brain cells thinking about it.

*Like I'm doing now.* He shook his head as his shoes clapped down the last flight of stairs to the lobby. Twelve flights. His blood was flowing, his heart and lungs awake enough now for the drive home. He stifled another yawn.

"Good evening, Mr. Muldoon." The synthetic security guard raised its hand mechanically, forcing a broad, fake smile. Everything about these things was fake.

But Muldoon returned the gesture. SYNs were human, more or less. He was no bigot. At least he didn't want to be.

"Another late night?"

Harry Muldoon stared at the guard as a nauseating chill of déjà vu swept over him. He'd been here before. This moment—he'd lived it before. But how was that possible?

Of course it was. How many times had he been the last one to leave the building for the night, the first one to show up at the break of dawn? Too many times to count.

"Yeah. Too late." He closed his eyes and squeezed the bridge of his nose.

*Way too late.* He was spooking himself.

"Working on a difficult case?" The guard's eyes looked genuinely interested.

*I should know its name.* "Hard to find missing persons when they don't want to be found."

"The nature of the beast." Another artificial smile.

Small talk. With a creature bred in a Petri dish. *I've really got to go home.*

"Goodnight." Muldoon turned and raised his hand in farewell. The guard mimicked the gesture. *I'll get its name tomorrow.*

The SYN had only worked the security station for two years now. Not really long enough to be on a first-name basis. *Heck, I don't even know the name of that travel agent in the office next to mine.* Burl-something. Burlap. Maybe. *I'll get his name tomorrow too.*

His thoughts were meandering, a sure sign it was too late for him to be out in public. Maybe he'd make the drive home on automatic tonight, ensure that he arrived in one piece. He nodded, agreeing with his reflection in the window of his vehicle—a sleek two-seater built for speed and fuel efficiency. The *Paradox*. Clever. The makings of a grin tugged at a corner of his unshaven face as he palmed the driver's door.

"Destination?" droned the voice of the computer as he fell into the firm bucket seat. The door drifted shut behind him.

"Home." He fumbled with the safety harness.  
"Automatic drive."

"Confirmed. Estimated time of arrival: ten minutes."

The buckle snapped into place, and he closed his eyes for a moment. The car veered from the curb and accelerated, the steering grips tilting side to side by themselves with every vector adjustment. He dropped his head back against the support cushion. It had been a long night. A long day. And what did he have to show for it?

Squat. Besides the makings of one killer headache.

He could still see the surface of his desk glowing behind his eyelids. The files, the photos. Well-organized chaos. The timeline would help put things in order, but other than adding some chronology to the case, it was useless. It wouldn't bring a man back from the dead. And Harry Muldoon was beginning to think that's exactly what had happened to his wife's father.

He'd been murdered.

Brilliant government scientist, prohibited from further experimentation with temporal mechanics, goes into hiding and is never heard from again. Killed off by the same Feds who fired him in the first place, more than likely. The only way they could get rid of him for good.

There was nothing in the files to contradict or support this theory. It was a worst-case scenario. Occam's Razor redefined: in the absence of any other plausible answers, the worst possibility is the only one likely to be true. In this town, anyway.

Muldoon's head dropped forward with a jerk as he caught himself dozing. Good thing he wasn't driving. Soon he'd be home, in his own bed. Beside his wife, hopefully fast asleep already. Otherwise, he'd be forced to tell her about the enormous headway he'd made in the case. It was thrilling how he'd managed to track down the elusive truth.

Only she'd see straight through that brave façade. He'd spent most of the day just as he had for the past week,



following leads that led him in circles. Chasing his own tail like a dog—not one of those robo-hounds, but a real one from the old days before the Plague. Flesh and blood, fur and loads of saliva.

She had to know he was giving it all he had. But it was only natural that she'd have her doubts. He had plenty of his own. For starters, did he really want to find the old man? Did he want Cyrus Horton back in their lives?

*He and I never really hit it off. He didn't approve of the way we met: therapist and patient. More to the point, he knew something had to be wrong with me if I was seeing Irena for help. Incontrovertible proof I wasn't good enough for his daughter. Same old story, repeating itself across the ages.*

When was a man ever good enough for another man's daughter? When he could provide for her, put a roof over her head? When he gave her more than her father ever could? Antiquated notions. Yet the tension remained.

HellTown Tenement 3166 wouldn't always be the permanent residence of Mr. and Mrs. Harold and Irena Muldoon. They wouldn't be stuck there on the eighth floor for the rest of their lives. Not by a long shot. He had plans.

Break the next case wide open, solve the crime of the century, rake in the rewards. Once he earned the reputation that came with a successful detective agency, he'd hire on adjunct staff and let them do the grunt work. Move Irena out of the Tenements and over to Easy Street, just a few blocks down from The Pearl—only the hottest nightclub in all of NewCity. She'd love it there in the heart of town. That's where she belonged, to see and be seen in all that glitz and glamour. Not spending her nights locked up in a cramped apartment surrounded by drooling zombie neighbors Linked up and living virtually.

She never uttered a word of complaint, not when the pipes froze in the winter or when the paper-thin walls let them in on every moan and toilet flush from the adjoining

units. She'd married beneath her when her lips had loosed those fateful words: *I do*. Her father had been on government payroll at the time, and the Horton family had raised their only daughter with the finest things that a limitless line of credit could afford. Yet she gave all that up. For love.

*Why me?*

Muldoon remembered it like yesterday, standing in that grand ballroom at their reception. Most of it was a blur of flashing lights, loud jazz and an open bar, but one thing he remembered with crystal clarity: his smiling bride in his arms, an angel in white gliding across the dance floor, her gorgeous eyes locked with his.

*What have I ever done to deserve this amazing woman?*

He knew then and there that he'd do whatever was in his power to keep her happy. And so far, if he took her word for it, he'd succeeded. Her smile, those soft, dark eyes filled with adoration that she turned on him the first moment she saw him in the morning or at the end of a day spent too long apart. The same eyes he'd stared at in wonder in the middle of that ballroom as everything around them blurred into insignificance.

Years had passed. Bills piled up. Cases came and went. Some clients could pay, some couldn't. Muldoon didn't run a charity, but he knew when the cause was worth the cost. Take the Cyrus Horton case, for example. Not a credit to be made there, but it would give his wife the peace of mind she deserved. And it just might be the case that put his agency on the map, so to speak. The Feds hadn't even bothered looking for the eccentric inventor, from what Muldoon could tell. And as for the police, offering lip service was what they were best at. Not so good at following through.

For now, Muldoon was his own boss, and he liked it that way. But if ever there came a time when he and Irena couldn't make ends meet, if the bills kept outnumbering the

clients who could pay, then there was always the standing offer from Sergeant Armstrong over at the precinct: work for the force as a police detective. Be someone else's grunt. Solve cases—or not so much—the way they did. Live the rest of his life knowing he'd sold his soul for nothing more than a measly if consistent line of credit.

"Destination," the car droned as it eased to the curb in front of the block-long expanse of tenements, shrouded in shadows beneath the foggy moonlight. "Park or idle?"

He unfastened his harness as the door rotated upward. "Park."

With a wide yawn, he stepped out and onto the curb, hands thrust deep into his coat pockets against the night's chill. He watched as his car door dropped into place and the engine accelerated the vehicle away, around the corner toward the parking structure under the first level of ground-floor apartments.

In the quiet that followed, his gaze wandered up the street, then down, looking but not really seeing the endless blocks of identical grey buildings, every window dark but for the occasional solitary vigil here and there. Insomniacs. Too stressed out on life to enjoy the simple pleasures—like a good pillow and a mattress with enough support to cradle the cares of the world to their nightly grave, only to be resurrected in the morning by the stress of another twelve to fourteen hours. But that was all right. He'd be awake by then, alert and on top of things once again. Strong enough to bear the burdens of this town on his broad shoulders.

*What am I doing out here?*

He turned away from the vacant street to face the imposing, nondescript monstrosity that was none other than glorious Tenement 3166, home sweet home jutting up from the concrete as if it had grown there untended for too long. The lobby door slid jerkily aside as it sensed his approach, halting itself only to groan and force the next few centimeters, then an entire meter before it gave up.

"Good effort," Muldoon muttered. It wouldn't be long until he'd have to start opening this thing the old-fashioned way, with a kick or a shove. Maybe both.

With another half-stifled yawn, he made his way to the stairwell and mounted the flights, one after another in the flickering fluorescent light. That same obnoxious sense of déjà vu tried to assert itself, but he beat it to the punch. It was only natural that he'd find these well-traversed steps and graffiti-stained walls familiar. This was his home. Like it or not, this was where Harry Muldoon hung his hat for the night.

He expected the stairwell to be empty and silent, like the streets outside. He expected the hallway up on the eighth floor to be the same, as it was every night. He never saw his neighbors. Most spent their lives locked up tight inside their apartments, living on the Link. Maybe once or twice he'd passed them in the halls, but he couldn't be sure he recognized them. It was the way things were. People kept to themselves until one of them went missing.

That's when they might request the services of a certain private investigator. If he was lucky.

So it was with a certain degree of curiosity that he reached the eighth floor hallway and heard what sounded like a rubber ball thumping against the wall. Thump, rebound, caught. Then again: thump, rebound, caught. Methodical, practiced. Rhythmic.

It stopped as soon as he approached.

She looked just a few years old, small for her age. Vacant, sagging eyes, dark behind a tangled mess of black hair, stared up at him without a hint of curiosity. Yet they stared nonetheless. In the palm of her hand, clenched between fingernails that were long and unkempt, was a grey rubber ball. It remained frozen in her small claws, hovering at eye level where she'd caught it just a moment ago. Now the rhythm was off. It would never be the same after this intrusion.

Muldoon attempted a smile, but it twitched crookedly. Little kids always made him nervous. Difficult to predict what they would do next. "How many was that?"

Her eyes didn't show any recognition, didn't blink. But the vocal cords vibrated. "Huh?"

He gestured lamely toward the wall. "How many have you caught?"

"In a row?" She didn't look irritated, didn't sound it. No emotional inflection at all, really.

"Yeah."

"I don't know."

It was too late for a kid this size to be out here all alone. "Where are your folks?"

"Who?"

*Probably an archaic word.*

"Your parents. They know where you are?"

Her frail shoulders lifted and dropped, and at first it didn't look like she was going to reply. "They don't know anything." Now there was some feeling in her tone, a brief flash of anger in the pools of her eyes.

"You guys get into an argument or something?"

The ball compressed as her grip tightened. For the first time, she looked away, focused on her target: the wall in front of her covered in black graffiti. "They don't even know I'm here."

"You sure of that?" *What am I doing? I should be home, in bed, not out here counseling a disturbed youngster.* That was Irena's job.

A loud thump, a fast rebound. She caught the ball automatically. "They're plugged in. Just sit on their butts all day." Thump, rebound, caught. Squeezed tight.

*Parents are zombies, huh?* "Got any friends?"

"None of your business, mister." Thump, rebound, caught. Brow furrowed. Whatever free therapy the bouncing ball had once offered was lost now, thanks to him. "I don't talk to strangers."

"Yeah, probably a good idea." He shouldn't have said anything. Should have ducked past the bouncing ball and headed down the hallway to his unit, where he belonged. "Well, nice to meet you." He shuffled his feet. "Hope you can give that wall a break at some point. Doubt it knows what it did to offend you."

She kept her eyes to herself as he passed. His shoes clapped across the tile and echoed against the doors of the units on either side. 801, 802, 803. As he passed 804, the bouncing ball resumed its rhythm. Thump, rebound, caught, its echo competing for dominance with his footfalls.

He'd never seen the kid before, didn't know where she lived or why he even cared. Yet he did. *She shouldn't be out there by herself.* Her parents' neglect made him squeamish. He always hated the cases involving kids. Abduction, murder, abuse—so much worse when kids were in the picture. They had their whole lives ahead of them; it was a cosmic crime to spoil that. He had no stomach for it, couldn't hold an objective eye when it came to sorting out the grisly evidence. All he wanted to do was kill the son-of-a-bitch responsible. Every time.

The last thing he wanted to see in the morning was the face of that little girl on the Link. *CHILD ABDUCTED FROM TENEMENT 3166... BODY FOUND—*

"Hey mister," she called after him, the ball clenched in her hand again.

He stopped at his door. "Yeah?"

"I lost count." Thump, rebound, caught. Pause. "You messed me up."

He almost smiled. *Same here, kid.* He palmed the sensor grate beside unit 806. It glowed between his fingers, releasing the door with a click as it slid aside.

A soft light emanated from the far corner of the living room where a lamp sat on an end table. It illuminated the black faux-leather couch beside it and cast a warm halo around his wife's dark hair draping a pillow. She lay on her

side, curled up beneath a blanket. Her shoulder rose and fell with each unlabored breath.

She didn't stir as he entered and the door slid shut, locking itself behind him. Sound asleep now, but she had been waiting up for him. She would've been in bed otherwise. Two untouched place settings sat on the kitchen table, and the fresh aroma of something delicious permeated the air. Lasagna and garlic bread? Despite the hour, Muldoon found himself salivating. He couldn't remember when he'd eaten last. His stomach rumbled, even as it sank with the realization that while she was waiting up for him, he was breaking the promise he'd made.

*No more late nights.*

She would forgive him, but he wouldn't deserve it.

He pulled off his coat, laid it over one of the chairs in the kitchen, set his hat on the bare counter. Smoothed back his hair out of habit. Glanced down at his shoulder holster. He removed it, placing the gun on the counter like it was a sleeping child he didn't want to disturb. He stepped away from it without a glance back.

She held his gaze captive, this peaceful sleeping beauty. He felt himself drawn to her, pulling him to his knees on the floor beside her, beckoning his hand to brush her cheek, sweep a lock of her hair up over her ear as his lips came close enough to touch her. But he hesitated. *Why?* He wanted to kiss her, smile down at her as she stirred, sensing his presence, gradually waking and stretching, her eyes opening to him with everlasting warmth.

He drew back, but his hand remained on the pillow next to her head. He watched her. His eyes drifted along the curves of her body beneath the blanket, followed each rise and fall of her breaths, then returned to the smooth skin of her face, the slope of her cheek where he'd almost kissed her. He'd come that close to waking her.

*Irena... I'll find him. You'll see.* He stroked her hair across the pillow. *You'll get your father back.* He closed his

eyes. It was like a prayer: *I promise.*

He rocked back onto his heels and swayed for a moment, then staggered as quietly as he could to the bedroom. The walls swayed around him, and he frowned. He was more than exhausted. This was borderline sleepwalking.

He plunged into the darkness, and his knees made contact with the footboard, guiding him in the right direction. He fell face-first onto his pillow, and his body followed, caving into the mattress. The last conscious thought that passed through his mind came like a voice from a kilometer away. *I should take off my shoes...*

Irena awoke after a disturbing dream she couldn't remember and rose with the blanket pulled around her shoulders. She found her husband's coat, hat, and gun in the kitchen. A faint smile played across her lips. Her eyes drifted to the table in the dining corner, to the tall glasses and square plates that remained untouched. She sighed, the hint of a smile gone. *Tomorrow night, maybe.* She left the kitchen as it was and returned to the living room.

"Lamp off," she said, and the light obeyed, fading to darkness.

She found her husband facedown on the bed as if he'd taken a running leap and landed there, arms and legs outstretched. Rhythmically, he released gusts of breath into the thick pillow.

"Time?" she whispered as she tapped the plug behind her ear and reached for her husband's feet.

"Two seventeen AM," came the artificial voice of her Link interface. It sounded like an ageless woman on sedatives. "Set alarm?"

"No." She untied each of Harry's black shoes and eased them off his feet, one at a time. "No alarms," she whispered.

"Confirmed."

She tapped the plug again to disconnect from the Link and set the shoes on the floor at the foot of the bed. Her



gaze remained on her husband's sprawled-out body. She found herself drawn to him even like this, dead to the world. Without a thought, she crept on hands and knees to lie beside him, curled against him.

But she didn't sleep. In the darkness, she watched her husband's face, half-turned toward her on the pillow. His eyelids twitched as he dreamt.

*I love you, Harold Muldoon.*

She hoped he knew how much. She refrained from touching him, kissing him. She wouldn't wake him. Instead she watched the syncopated rhythm of his eyelids.

Harry Muldoon stood in an alley lit by a single flickering streetlamp. The only one that still took its job seriously, and it was on its last leg. *Cold tonight.* Muldoon's breath drifted upward, hanging in the air as clouds of mist before dissipating.

What was he doing here? Following a lead?

The plug vibrated behind his ear. He tapped it, and instantly the white fog of the entry portal consumed his vision. He entered his log-in and set his pass-images to random shuffle.

"Thank you for using LinkCom," the larger-than-life, disembodied face of the virtual operator greeted him, her features designed to be perfect, proportionate. She wore an outdated headset and smiled fake pearly whites that glistened between plump lips, inviting him to continue.

"How may I assist you?"

"Receive call," he replied, his voice louder than he would have liked.

"Of course. You have an incoming call from an unknown source. Unfortunately, only audio is being transmitted. Would you like to proceed?"

"Yes." Not really. He'd rather be sleeping.

There was a short pause. Then the operator's face dissolved into one of his pass-images: the pounding surf of a

tropical island seascape in shades of grey.

His plug pulsed again. Another call?

No. There was no other call. Only this one. The alley was gone, and he was back in his bedroom, blinking at the dark.

He logged-in, shuffled his pass-images. The operator greeted him, this time for real.

"Receive call," he said, his voice groggy, deep and muffled.

"Of course. You have an incoming call from Sergeant Armstrong of the NewCity Municipal Police. Would you like to proceed?"

"Yes." *Not really.* He wanted to get some sleep. Was that too much to ask? "Put him through."

The operator's perfect face faded into an emerging mass of splotchy lumpiness that could be none other than Armstrong in the virtual flesh.

"You sleepin' there, lad?"

"Not anymore." Muldoon lay mumbling into his pillow with Irena sound asleep under his arm. A pre-dawn glow illuminated the shade drawn over the window above him.

"You sure 'bout that?" A hearty chuckle.

"Hold on," Muldoon whispered. He eased himself awkwardly off the side of the bed, keeping an eye on his wife. She didn't stir. He stepped out of the room, noticing that he wore only socks on his feet. He glanced back at Irena and smiled.

"Thought you were an early-riser, Harry," Armstrong said.

With a hand held out against the wall, Muldoon shuffled into the dark kitchen and slid one of the chairs out from the table. "Late to bed, early to rise," he muttered.

"Makes a man grumpy, and gives 'im baggy eyes."

"Is that why you called?" Muldoon tried to wipe the sleep from his face as he seated himself, propping his elbows on the table. "To recite terrible poetry?"

Armstrong snorted. "If only. No, I'm afraid it would be another matter entirely that has me callin' you at this ungodly hour."

"What time is it?"

"You don't want to know. Trust me." A pause. "We-uh received something that might be of interest to you. Looks like it's related to the...Cyrus Horton case."

Muldoon shook his head wearily. "Thought you'd given up on that one." *Years ago.*

"Apparently, somebody doesn't know it's cold. They dropped off a package for you."

Muldoon sat up. "You've got my attention."

Armstrong grinned and reached out of sight for a moment. He returned with a large manila envelope at eye level. "Says: To Harold Muldoon, care of Sergeant Armstrong, et cetera. From—" A pregnant pause. "*Cyrus Horton.*" The grin faded. "Got to say, lad, it's eating me up with curiosity."

"You haven't opened it." Muldoon could see that he hadn't, and he marveled at the old cop's restraint.

Armstrong scowled. "Back in my day, that'd be a Federal offense—opening up somebody else's mail!"

Muldoon smirked. *Mail* hadn't existed for decades. "No idea what it is?"

"Nope." He shook the package with both hands like an eager kid on New Year's Day. "Can't tell. Not much heft to it." He dropped it onto his desk. "So why don't you come on down, and you can do us both a big favor by tearing this thing open. The sooner the better, I might add. I'm a patient man, but..." He winked. "'Ain't every day we get a special delivery from a ghost."

*Cyrus Horton is no ghost. He's alive, and he's still out there somewhere. He just doesn't want to be found.*

Muldoon knew better than to say anything like that aloud. His theories had been shot down years ago after the official investigation became *prolonged*, according to the authorities. Horton would never be found, they said, and it

was only a matter of time until he would be declared legally dead. It didn't matter that Harry Muldoon had a hunch, didn't matter that he knew Cyrus Horton better than the rest of them—knew he was too smart to leave a trail when falling off the grid was exactly what he had in mind. Muldoon was the old inventor's son-in-law, after all, and that made him too tainted by emotional proximity to be of any value in the official investigation.

Emotion didn't enter into the equation, as far as Muldoon was concerned. He was determined to find Horton, not due to any bond the two of them shared, but because they were both tied to the same woman. It tore Irena apart not to know what had become of her father. Even if the truth turned out to be gruesome, it would be better than not knowing at all, wondering if he would ever return someday. She tried to hide it, putting on a brave face, but Muldoon wouldn't have been much of a detective if he couldn't see through the façade. He knew her heart. It's why he loved her.

So he put on his own mask, one that half-smiled and exuded a nonchalant bravado. "I'll get my shoes on."

Armstrong chuckled. "You do that."

The operator's face reappeared. "Call terminated. Would you like to review your charges?" She smiled, waiting expectantly.

"No." He tapped his plug to disengage from the Link and stood.

There was his hat, his coat, his holstered weapon—right where he'd left them last night. Minutes ago? Four or five hours was more like, but it didn't seem so. He was still exhausted, despite whatever sleep he'd bagged.

Stifling a yawn, he pulled on his shoulder holster and paused to sniff at his underarm. Ripening. And his mouth tasted bad. Not the best way to start the day. But he wasn't on his way to impress anybody special. Armstrong and his

uniforms had always used stale coffee as mouthwash, as far as he knew.

He slipped into his coat and ran a hand through his hair before setting his hat in place and tugging down the brim mid-stride. He stopped at the door. No shoes. He looked back toward the silent bedroom.

He wanted to call out to her, let her know he'd be back, that he was just stepping out for a few minutes. But this desire was quenched by one even stronger, a self-imposed imperative not to disturb her sleep. Peace was in short supply for Irena Muldoon, and he'd be damned before he caused any more disruptions in her life.

So he retrieved his shoes, tied them on and left without a word, leaving the front door to slide behind him and lock itself as his footfalls receded down the hallway outside.

Irena had been awake from the moment he'd so carefully climbed out of bed to answer the incoming call. She'd listened with eyes open, hearing every word on Harry's side of the conversation. She was able to gather that he'd be meeting the caller and they would be opening some sort of unidentified object.

She wondered if it had something to do with the case he was working on, the one that kept him late at the office trying to put the pieces together, a puzzle where nothing fit the way it should. Something to do with her father's disappearance? She had a feeling it did. Woman's intuition, maybe.

But what could explain why she'd shut her eyes and pretended to be sound asleep when he came back for his shoes? Why had she lain there as he tied them on and left without a word? She could have stirred, invited him into a warm embrace, but she hadn't. She told herself she didn't want to interrupt him, that she knew how important it was for him to solve this case and that she'd be damned before she slowed him down. But then her mind would return to

one question: Why had *he* left without even a whisper or a kiss goodbye?

She sat up. He probably hadn't wanted to wake her. A good excuse.

*So what's mine?* She shook her head, squeezed her temples. *Am I playing games?* Passive aggression had never been her emotional default position.

If one of her clients were in the same situation, she would have been able to see things clearly and to articulate the counsel they paid her for: *You're not being petty. You've lost your father, and now your husband seems to be drifting out of reach. You feel alone, and you're not sure that you're strong enough to make it on your own.*

But of course her clients were strong enough. They always were. She just had to help them see it for themselves.

If only the physician could heal herself.

Harry Muldoon headed down the empty hallways of Tenement 3166's eighth floor. Despite his best efforts at not distracting himself, he wondered which door held that little girl's Link-addicted parents. Was she all right?

None of his business. Not yet. Not until tragedy struck. That's how it worked. More often than not, anyway.

He kept his gaze on the steps as he descended the stairwell one flight at a time, kept his mind focused on the task at hand: a package left for him, like in the old days when information passed from sender to receiver by way of ink printed on paper. Quaint, but that wasn't what held his attention. Even as he tried to debunk the idea, coming up with plenty of alternative explanations that were more plausible—some kind of hoax or practical joke, just some jackass hoping for a few fleeting moments of LinkFame—he couldn't help but wonder if this item had actually been sent by Cyrus Horton himself. Proof that he was, without a doubt,

still alive and eager to make contact with the land of the living.

After so many years of silence, this was a strange way to announce his re-entry into the world. But *strangeness* was the old inventor's *modus operandi*. He'd never really followed any code of conduct that could be considered normal. Not even with his own family.

Muldoon tapped his plug as he stepped out of the foyer and into the warming cool of the grey morning. "Pick up," he vocalized.

He remembered the night he'd asked for his wife's hand in marriage. An old-fashioned thing to do, but he always remembered his parents' story, the one he'd heard as a kid, and it left an impression. Asking the father's permission, requesting his blessing, had to be part of the preliminaries when he was ready to take the plunge. He'd known Irena Horton was the one, his *last stop* so to speak, after their third date. There was no way around it. He was whipped.

"Do you love her?" Cyrus Horton had appeared out of nowhere one night when Muldoon brought Irena home and was turning to leave—after a fairly passionate lip-lock.

Muldoon's response, albeit startled, had been immediate: "I do."

The older man's stooped shoulders were bare under black suspenders holding up a pair of baggy slacks. His white tank was spattered with grease, and his hands worked feverishly on a device, polishing it with a ragged piece of cloth.

"You want to marry her?" His wide eyes stared at Muldoon, waiting for an answer. There was no guile in his tone, only curiosity.

Muldoon had been taken aback. It hadn't helped matters that Irena was standing right there. He glanced at her, and she half-smiled awkwardly, not knowing what to say or do—but with warm amusement in her eyes. She knew her father, and she must have known something like this was

coming, sooner or later. He wasn't so immersed in his secret work as to be oblivious to his daughter's late night activities. She didn't seem irritated or even embarrassed, only sorry for Muldoon's sake.

But he hadn't flinched. It wasn't how he'd imagined going about it, not at all like the story he'd heard from his own father, but the moment had arrived—ready or not. So Muldoon nodded once, holding the hand of his future bride.

"Yes. I do."

His face had burned to the tips of his ears, but he'd held his head high, even managing to venture a glance at Irena in time to catch her gaze. Eyes a little larger than usual, with a smile spreading across her lips.

Horton had blinked once in response. Then he'd sniffed with indifference and turned away, heading downstairs to his workroom without another word.

"Destination?" droned the voice of the computer as Muldoon's black *Paradox* eased to the curb. The driver's door rotated upward, inviting him inside.

"NewCity Police Headquarters." He buckled the harness across his chest as the door dropped and locked itself.

"Automatic drive."

"Confirmed. Estimated time of arrival: twelve minutes."

The car accelerated away from the curb, the steering grips tilting side to side with every minor course change. The glare of the sun's early rays broke across the windshield, but their brilliance was fleeting. The glass darkened, muting the effects of the morning sun above the city's harsh geometric skyline.

Muldoon blinked up at the light. How long had this star been part of Earth's twenty-four hour cycle? This carefully orchestrated dance across the heavens involving massive planetary bodies hurtling through space at speeds too incredible to fathom? The years themselves were too many to fully comprehend. The human brain can only grasp so



many zeros before millions, billions, trillions all start to sound the same. Didn't help that they rhymed.

Muldoon rubbed between his eyes. *We're so finite.* Profound thoughts always seemed to arrive in the mornings before he could do much with them, before the day had dulled the edges of his mind. *We're like little kids, really. All we see is what's right in front of us. We have no concept of the vastness of time.*

NewCity Police Headquarters resembled every other government building in town: an imposing concrete and glass structure built above meters of endless steps with solid stone pillars supporting a neoclassical pinnacle. NEWCITY MUNICIPAL POLICE engraved in big Roman-style lettering. The front steps were already shaping up to be a major thoroughfare as cops, lawyers, and various forms of low-life made their daily pilgrimage to the knights of the round table, the keepers of the peace: TO PROTECT THE RULE OF LAW.

Muldoon's car pulled to the curb behind a checkered taxi with its engine humming.

"Park or idle?" the computer droned.

"Idle." He removed the harness and stepped out under the door as it opened. "This shouldn't take long."

"Confirmed."

He took the stairs two at a time, passing curious glances and frowns on either side. Most weren't as eager to reach their destination. *Get the package, find out what it's all about, get back home.* Talk to Irena. Let her know what was going on with the case, maybe have something tangible to show her now. If this turned out to be anything more than a tasteless joke.

"Harry, my boy!" Armstrong grinned inside the foyer, baring his coffee-stained teeth. He had the large envelope in one hand and a mug of steaming brew in the other which, despite the hustle and bustle around him, managed to remain in its ceramic receptacle without spilling a drop.

Muldoon shouldered his way through the throng and raised his voice to be heard. "We're doing this out here?"

Armstrong shook his head, then jerked it back to the left. "My office. I'll blaze us a trail."

He turned and Muldoon followed, watching as the chief's girth cut a swath through the bodies moving to and fro in the bullpen before him.

"Something going on I don't know about?"

Armstrong chuckled, rocking his broad shoulders. He glanced back with, "Been a while since you've come down here for a visit. We've got our hands full these days, and that's a fact."

"Somehow I doubt you've missed me."

"Can't speak for the others around here, but as for me —" He paused as he approached his office door and nodded grimly. "Aye. I have." He palmed the sensor plate, and the glow darkened his hand for a moment. Then the door slid aside, and Armstrong lumbered into his cluttered office. "Can I get you anything? Coffee?"

"I'll pass." Muldoon stepped inside, and the door slid shut behind him. He stood with his hands in the deep pockets of his overcoat, his gaze drifting from the package in the chief's grip to survey the mess around him. Armstrong was a collector of 20<sup>th</sup> century cop memorabilia. Hats, badges, unloaded guns. They might have fetched a credit or few in some circles. Too bad all the signed photos of former commissioners were worthless. Hard copies held only sentimental value these days. "Sets me on edge."

"Ah, that's right. Not one for stimulants, are you." Armstrong dropped into the padded chair behind his massive desk and exhaled loudly. He held up the envelope and frowned at it. Then he tossed it across the deskscreen, sending it into piles of data chips that scattered across the glowing surface. "The moment of truth."

Muldoon strode forward and lifted the package, weighing it in his hand as he did so. It couldn't hold much, but it held something—an odd, solid shape that swelled the bottom of the envelope. He turned it over, surveyed the handwriting. Broad strokes in all caps:

TO: HAROLD MULDOON  
C/O SERGEANT ARMSTRONG  
NEWCITY MUNICIPAL POLICE  
FROM: CYRUS HORTON, UNDERGROUND

"Open it already, lad!" Armstrong was grinning again, but his eyes held unguarded impatience.

*Underground?* What could that mean?

"No idea who dropped it off?" He glanced at Armstrong before tearing the top off the envelope in one clean stroke. "The vidfeeds didn't catch anybody?"

Armstrong stared at the open end of the package as Muldoon tipped it and shook whatever was inside into the palm of his hand.

"Nobody. Was like they knew the orientation of our surveillance cams."

"They kept out of range." The plastic wristwatch landed with an absence of fanfare. Muldoon looked down at it without a change in expression. "Well, what do you know."

Armstrong blinked. "That's it?"

"Not quite." There was something else in the package, a thin ream of what looked like paper, bound on the side. An actual *book*. "Looks like nostalgia comes in two's, Sarge."

He set the wristwatch on the sergeant's desk and pulled out the small dog-eared book. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. He stared at the sketch of the cat with a broad, full set of teeth on the cover. Alternate teeth had been shaded in grey. He didn't know what to say. Not a single quip.

"Well now. That's odd, isn't it?" Armstrong reached for the wristwatch, turning it over in his sausage-fingers. "I remember havin' one of these as a lad. They kinda went out

with the buffalo once the Link came online. For adults, anyhow."

Muldoon flipped through the book, refreshing his memory of what that old library had smelled like, back when he was a kid. The last one in town. He couldn't remember the most recent paper-and-print book he'd read. Not since the Link.

The novelty alone of this time-worn children's classic was enough to hold his interest at first, but then he noticed something. The pages slowed through his fingers. On every page, starting at the beginning of the first chapter, certain letters had been circled in black ink. A *t* from *to*, an *i* from *into*, an *m* from *mind*. Some kind of message?

"I hate to say it, but looks like somebody's just pullin' your chain." Armstrong dropped the wristwatch onto the desk in disgust and sat back with an explosive sigh. "Sorry to drag you down here for this. Wish it'd been more."

"Yeah." Muldoon closed the book and slid it into the envelope. "You and me both."

"Maybe you could auction them off on the Link." He shrugged. "I'm sure there's a collector or two who'd be interested in this kinda crap."

"Now there's an idea." Muldoon scooped the wristwatch into the envelope as well and tucked the package inside his coat. "Or I could start a collection of my own." He nodded toward the old cop's clutter. "Follow your example."

"Hey now, these are high-value items!" Armstrong grinned. "That's the spirit, lad. Don't let a thing like this get to your head. That's what they want, those jokers. Nothing else better to do than to try and screw around with us. Cowards, hiding in shadows. That's all they are. They don't give us a fighting chance to even the score!"

Muldoon was ready to leave, but he didn't want it to look like he was in a hurry. No reason to be rude. "No prints?"

"On the package?" Armstrong cursed. "Not a one. They were careful." Then he chuckled again, shaking his head.

"Either that or... Like I said. Left by a ghost."

"Get one of your techs to tune up the surveillance feeds. Isn't there some kind of *poltergeist* spectrum?" He half-smiled as he turned away.

Armstrong exploded with laughter. "Go on, get outta here!"

"Don't have to tell me twice." Muldoon raised a hand in farewell as the door slid open before him, and he left the sergeant to his chuckles and bad coffee.

Hard to believe, but the volume of human traffic outside had increased. Muldoon shouldered his way through bodies like a fish swimming against the current. He kept one hand inside his coat to hold the package in place. Why had it been left for him? What could the message inside the book possibly mean? He couldn't even begin to guess the purpose of the wristwatch.

"Destination?" droned the *Paradox* computer, its engine idling where he'd left it at the curb. Now five empty taxicabs were doing the same, parked in front and behind.

"Office." He dropped the large envelope onto the passenger seat and buckled on the safety harness.

"Automatic drive."

"Confirmed."

He stared at the book's edge protruding from the open end of the package. He watched it warily, as if it contained something dangerous, something that might take his life on a course he'd never be able to turn back from. One he never could have imagined.

Almost as if he already knew that it would.

"Estimated time of arrival: ten minutes, due to traffic conditions." The car pulled away from the curb. The twin steering grips wobbled independently.

Muldoon snatched up the book and turned to chapter one. "Down the Rabbit-Hole." He scanned the first four letters circled sequentially; they spelled *TIME*. Then the next twelve: *DISPLACEMENT*.

There was more.  
A lot more.

## SIX

*Now*

Gavin Lennox considered himself enlightened. He held no prejudices, no bigotries, to the best of his knowledge, against any particular people group. He treated everyone the same. Fairly. Even the synthetics under his employ—he'd always afforded them the dignity the government said they deserved.

So it was not intolerance in any shape or form that caused him to shrink back at the sight of the two followers of the Way seated on either side of Mayor Joseph Reeves. Instead, it was something akin to shock.

"Here he is, just the man we've been waiting for!" The mayor stood, clapping once in delight and grinning broadly as he opened his arms wide. The two men in white robes rose from their seats. Reeves strode forward from the table and beckoned Lennox within reach. "Gentlemen," he said, half-turning toward the monks, "may I introduce to you the man of the hour, Mr. Gavin Lennox himself!"

Lennox felt himself stiffen as the mayor slid a bulky arm around his back, and he watched the two holy men bow toward him at the waist. Their skin was darker, but otherwise, they looked exactly like the sword-wielding apparition he'd encountered in the alley outside.

Outside an alternate nightclub in another reality. The Pit.

"Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Lennox," said the one on the right, his teeth an even row of bulky ivories. "We have been told much about you."

Lennox forced a smile, one crafted to make him appear at ease and in complete control of the situation. "Nothing true, I hope."

The mayor guffawed and clapped him on the back. The smiles remained on the faces of the two robed men even as their eyes shifted with a hint of confusion.

"Only the good stuff, only the good stuff," Reeves assured him. "Won't you join us?" He gestured toward an open seat at their table.

"Oh yes, Mr. Lennox, please do," said the monk on the left. He looked like he was going to bow again. Lennox hoped he wouldn't.

"Mr. Lennox is a very busy man," Sally said with a friendly wink.

Lennox noticed the SYN for the first time, standing off to the side. Unobtrusive, watching silently, until now.

"Nonsense, Sally. Nothing is more important than the here and now. And no one in NewCity is more important than its venerable mayor and his distinguished guests." He nodded to Reeves and allowed himself to be guided to the seat saved for him.

"I'd be the first to argue differently." The mayor chuckled, his broad shoulders rocking as he sat down. "Regarding myself, that is."

The holy men waited until Lennox seated himself. Their deference did not go unnoticed.

"You see? Even my friends know the pecking order around here." The mayor burst into another fit of laughter while his guests grinned and stared with the same confused look darting through their eyes.

"Have George bring up a bottle of the house Merlot," Lennox leaned over to tell Sally. His smile was locked in place, and his eyes didn't leave the mayor.

She came close to him. "Will there be anything else, sir?"



He dismissed her with a slight wave of his hand. She watched him a moment longer than was necessary, but he didn't mind. Synthetics had their quirks, more so as they aged, approaching their expiration date. She stepped away from the table with her eyes on the floor and retreated toward the stairs.

"So what brings you to The Pearl tonight, gentlemen?" Lennox regarded the two strangers with mild interest. Sally should have mentioned that the mayor had company. As it was, he would have to forego the topic of conversation he'd planned to delve into with Reeves: among other things, setting up a face-to-face with the governor. It was high time Lennox met the woman. "Surely it can't be the local celebrities."

"Insomuch as I dragged them in here—then yes, blame it on me." The mayor tamed his joviality and cleared his throat. "Mr. Lennox, I'd like to introduce two very good friends of mine, Kuan Ti and Yeng Zhu, both visiting our humble city from..." He frowned. "How do you pronounce the name of your Province? I'm afraid to offend you further with my terrible accent."

The one on the left—Kuan—smiled. "You honor us, Mayor Reeves." He turned his dark eyes to Lennox. "But there is not a single Eastern Province to stand in comparison with your NewCity or *The Pearl*, a magnificent centerpiece. Your pearl of great price, yes?"

Lennox nodded, knowing he'd heard the reference before. He just couldn't place it.

"Mayor Reeves has told us much about the work you have done to restore your city," added the other one, Yeng, who smiled just as wide. "The Plague ravaged most of the continent, and many of the Provinces have yet to recover, despite the many years that have passed. Yet here you have managed to accomplish so much."

"He's a man of vision, our Mr. Lennox," the mayor offered his two credits' worth. "He knew what this city

needed, and he did what had to be done. But believe me, there were plenty of bureaucrats dedicated to standing in his way."

"Not you, Joe," Lennox said.

Kuan and Yeng darted their eyes to the mayor, then back to Lennox, intrigued by his abbreviated use of the mayor's given name.

"Am I glad of it!" Reeves laughed heartily. "I'd be eating crow now like the rest of them!"

"Why would this be?" Yeng asked. "Why would they wish to stand in your way—in the way of progress?"

Lennox shrugged. It was old news, water under the proverbial bridge. "They had their reasons. Some saw it as frivolous, unnecessary—a swanky nightclub in the middle of a town that was falling apart? They cited humanitarian reasons, the usual. They didn't think I had the city's best interests at heart." He shook his head and traced the swirling pattern in the white tablecloth with his finger. "We almost didn't make it."

He felt Reeves watching him. If he wasn't careful, Lennox could descend without warning into a very dark place, one with the potential to cast a shadow on everyone at the table. But at the moment, he couldn't think of anything to liven the discussion. His thoughts insisted on returning to that albino monk in the alley—

"Thank goodness for Ashland Solomon and SYNCorp," the mayor blurted out and chuckled, the only one who seemed to understand the humor of his statement.

"Yes," Kuan nodded, his pensive expression matching that of Lennox. "These synthetic beings... They serve you well?"

Lennox looked up with the spark of a man at ease with his surroundings. "Take a look around. They run the place. I'd say they do their jobs well enough."

"They...run it? You mean—?"

"Everybody from the waiters to the band down there, they're all some variety of genetically engineered life. And believe it or not—" Lennox lowered his voice as he leaned in. "Plenty of the tables around us host their share as well." He smiled at the surprised expressions on the two holy men's faces. They restrained themselves from noticeably glancing about at the other patrons nearby. "The Pearl is all about equal opportunity. I don't care where your DNA came from, so long as you've got a healthy line of credit. A synthetic can spend it just as well as anybody else—maybe even better." He winked. "Ashland Solomon was our first major investor, and after she made it known that her company was standing firmly behind us, the others fell into place—including our open-minded mayor here. The rest, as they say, is history."

"History in the making," Reeves was quick to add. "Our work in NewCity has only just begun. The *Revival!*"

"Yes," Kuan nodded, but he seemed preoccupied with something that had been said. "SYNCorp has provided you with your workforce, as well as your clientele, it would seem. Do you own them, then? Are they your slaves?"

"Not at all. They earn a salary, and they're free to spend their credit wherever they like. SYNCorp, in turn, receives a substantial subsidy from the government. Everybody wins."

"And what about the souls in this city who have no work, those who live on the benevolence of the government and who spend their days feeding their addiction to the Link? Is there a place for them here at The Pearl as well?"

Lennox blinked at the sudden course change in conversation. The mayor bit his lip, struck dumb for once.

Yeng cleared his throat. "You must forgive my brother, Mr. Lennox. He can be very...*direct*." He glanced at Kuan, who had not turned his intense gaze from Lennox. "He did not mean to show any disrespect."

"This is true," Kuan conceded. His smile returned. "I am merely curious, Mr. Lennox. I meant no offense."

"None taken," Lennox dismissed the concern. *They really know how to cover up their lack of good manners with uncommon courtesy.* "You're both followers of the Way, I take it?" The robes were a dead giveaway, but he also knew how to pretend to be polite.

They nodded, waiting for him to continue. The mayor squirmed, looking uncertain where this discussion was headed.

"Right. So you're morally opposed to the Link." He noted the scars on their necks where their interfaces had been surgically removed.

Yeng deferred to Kuan, who said, "We oppose the interface, yes. We encourage believers to have their subdermal plugs removed so that their souls will remain pure before God, unplugged from the Link and its countless virtual vices."

"And you believe a SYN has no soul."

They nodded without hesitation. "That is correct," said Kuan.

"And you know this...how, exactly?" Lennox arched his manicured eyebrows.

This time, it was Yeng who spoke. "A synthetic being is not a creation of God, but a creation of man. It lives when man gives it life, and it dies when it reaches its expiration date—preordained by the same man who created it. SYNs are not God-breathed, and, thus, carry no souls."

*Spoken straight from his catechism.*

"So God has nothing to do with it? Every time a SYN comes into this world with a beating heart, two eyes, two arms, two legs, God was elsewhere, doing God only knows what?"

A patient smile spread across Kuan's thin lips. "All of creation came from God. In the beginning, He formed all that we know out of nothing." He paused. "Yet when a man builds a house, it is the man who builds the house, not God.

The raw materials may have been from God, but the house is made by the man. It is his own creation."

"I'm having a tough time keeping up with you boys tonight," the major interjected with a dry chuckle, glancing from Lennox to Kuan. "But if we're discussing the construction of homes, then this might be an opportune time to bring up the proposed overhaul of HellTown—"

"That's where our beliefs differ, I'm afraid," Lennox said, holding Kuan's gaze. "I have to believe that *if* there is a God, then all life, whether it be conventional or genetically engineered, must originate with him."

Kuan nodded. "Then you believe the SYN has a soul?"

Lennox parted his lips to reply, but that's when George appeared at their table with a bottle and four goblet-sized wine glasses. Perfect timing.

"Here you are, Mr. Lennox. Shall I pour each of our guests a glass?" The two men in robes seemed to give the synthetic pause as he hesitated, hovering over the table.

"Yes, George." Lennox held Kuan's gaze, and as he did, he felt a playful smile creep across his lips. He waited until the SYN had set down each of the glasses and popped the cork. Then he spoke without looking up. "What do you think, George? Would you say I have a soul?"

The George model was handsome, in a way—what you would expect, maybe even hope for, in a waiter or bartender. Medium height, chiseled features, dark complexion. A winning smile that affirmed your choice of drink, steady hands that never got it wrong. A man's man, but smooth with the ladies. Lennox had a couple dozen of them working at The Pearl, maybe more; he'd lost count.

"Of course, Mr. Lennox," George replied, filling each of the glasses a third of the way full without spilling a single drop. His eyes remained focused on the task. "You're human."

A statement of fact and nothing more.

"And what about you, George?" Lennox turned his gaze onto the SYN.

"Me, sir?" He finished pouring the wine and set the bottle in the center of the table.

Lennox didn't glance at the holy men. He didn't need to. He knew they were both staring at George. The first synthetic they'd seen up close? Doubtful. You couldn't walk down the street in NewCity these days without bumping into as many SYNs as natural-born humans—not that Lennox himself had done much walking about town lately. He preferred to walk between towns, crossing the membrane between worlds. Seeing his own world through different eyes.

"Do I have a soul?" George said, making sure he understood the question.

"That's right."

"Well...I'd like to think so." A robust smile broke across the SYN's perfect, proportionate face.

Lennox released a pleasant chuckle, and the mayor echoed it awkwardly. His two guests smiled, tolerant yet amiable.

"Me too, George." Lennox nodded, pleased with the waiter's response. "Me too."

George bowed at the waist, smile intact, and left with, "If there's anything else you require, don't hesitate to call me over."

"Does that answer your question?" Lennox returned his gaze to Kuan as he reached for his glass.

"In a way, yes," the holy man conceded, tilting his head and pausing to look at the wine in his own glass, untouched. "It grants us insight into your view of the soul itself. That you perceive it as something not to be quantified or qualified. Would I be correct in this assumption?"

Lennox held his glass by its stem and swirled the wine out of habit. "I don't think it's something anyone can claim to comprehend. And as the first to admit full ignorance on

the subject, I'm the last to judge whether someone is *God-breathed* or *soulless*. Instead, I prefer to take the path of least resistance: Life is life. The question as to whether *any* of us has a soul is better left to holy men such as yourself." He raised his glass to Kuan in a gesture intended to show respect before he took a sip and held it for a moment behind his teeth.

Both Kuan and Yeng smiled, turning their heads toward one another in a self-effacing manner.

"We are *holy* only in that we have separated ourselves from the mainstream of society," Yeng admitted. "We do not claim to be perfect in any way. We are on the path to purity, but it is a life-long journey of sanctification."

Kuan, as seemed to be his way, was more direct. "Do not think for a moment that we cannot, or do not, *sin*, Mr. Lennox. We are by no means holy in the manner you may be implying. Speaking for myself, it is a daily struggle to avoid the power of my flesh. I am often ashamed of the choices I make. But no one is perfect, no not one."

"Well, in that case..." The mayor chuckled, nudging the glasses of wine toward his guests. "Drink up!"

The monks nodded their heads, smiling politely, but their hands remained in the sleeves of their robes, held across their midsections. Lennox didn't blame the mayor for trying. He obviously wanted to keep tonight's discussion from delving too deeply into anything too controversial.

"But back to your question, the one that started us down this road in the first place." Lennox didn't share the mayor's concerns. "You mentioned the fact that SYNCorp provides most of the bodies that run this place, as well as those who enjoy what we have to offer. I can't deny that. I don't have to. Our synthetics are hard-working, as are those who make up the bulk of our clientele, wherever SYNCorp has them serving in the city's workforce. Their credit is impeccable, and they spend it like there's no tomorrow." He

almost smiled, musing, "Maybe there isn't, for some of them."

"They are replaceable," Kuan said. "Ashland Solomon designs them that way, yes? The expiration date of each synthetic being ensures repeat business for SYNCorp."

Lennox nodded.

"And when these synthetics reach the date of their termination, they are known to experience certain...problems, is that correct?" Kuan paused. "Fixations, or obsessions."

"They can get a little twitchy toward the end," Lennox allowed, swirling his wine again and staring into the center of the dark centrifuge. "We haven't experienced that at The Pearl."

"But it is a risk you accept?"

"What I'm saying is, they keep this place running. They keep it alive. Honestly, if it wasn't for them, The Pearl might not even be here."

"Don't be so modest," the mayor chided.

Lennox glanced up. "Do you see any zombies?" He paused. "Of course not. They're all home tonight, Linked-up. Human vegetables for all intents and purposes. They could care less about their community, and they're perfectly fine wallowing in HellTown's squalor. You asked me if there is a place for them at The Pearl." He held Kuan's gaze, one of rapt attention. "If they can get over their addictions and start working for themselves instead of raking in government handouts, then of course they would be welcome here. As I'm sure they would be welcome in your temple—or church..." he trailed off, uncertain what their place of worship was called.

Kuan beamed, glancing at Yeng who smiled just as jubilantly. Lennox couldn't help but knit his brow. *What did I say? They look like two kids on New Year's morning!*

The mayor groaned, but his outburst was tempered by an overabundance of good humor. "I think I know where this



is headed."

"We are very pleased to hear you say these things, Mr. Lennox," Yeng said, bowing from his middle even as he sat at the table.

"Yes," Kuan agreed. "Mayor Reeves was very wise indeed to allow us this opportunity to make your acquaintance. While our beliefs may differ on a few issues, it is clearly evident that we share the same disgust for the effect the Link is having on the citizens of our respective Provinces. Here, in NewCity, it is quite apparent that you desire to raise the standard of living to an unprecedented level, one that has not been seen since long before the Plague." He paused and came up for air. "Forgive me, Mr. Lennox. I was a fool to have believed that your plan—this *Revival* that Mayor Reeves has explained to us—would not include the Link-addicts, the *undesirables* or *zombies*, as they are called. I should have known that there would be a place in your heart for their rehabilitation."

"Yes," Yeng was quick to add, even as Lennox raised a hand to slow them down. "And we believe the first step toward this city-wide rehabilitation must be the removal of your interfaces. *Cold turkey* is the ancient Western term for it, I believe." He glanced at Kuan for confirmation.

"Cold turkey, yes," Kuan echoed.

"Gentlemen." Lennox relaxed his brow and put on a smile designed to keep them at ease. "I appreciate your beliefs. And I respect them. It's this view of the Link shared by members of your sect—" *Cult*. "—that is the most well-known among heathens such as myself. However, the suggestion that we should somehow mandate the removal of our citizens' Link interfaces... It brings to mind another ancient Western adage you may be familiar with: *throwing the baby out with the bathwater*." He chuckled mildly, and the mayor was quick to join in. "Simply because a percentage of our human population is misusing the Link,

this should in no way cause us to consider eradicating the past century's greatest global advancement in technology."

Kuan's brow creased. "Yet you said but a moment ago —"

"Granted, there are humans in NewCity unquestionably in need of rehabilitation. For them, perhaps *cold turkey*—" He winked at Yeng. "—would be the most appropriate solution. But we'll have to leave that to the doctors to decide, when the time comes."

"SYN doctors," Kuan said.

"Of course." Lennox held his gaze. "There are some things I would never trust to a human. Medical care being one."

"Tell me, Mr. Lennox: Why is it that these synthetics are not allowed to have the subdermal implants? The *plugs*?" Kuan tilted his head to the side as though he already knew the answer. He asked the question in order to make a point.

Lennox knew what he wanted to hear. "Because it would distract them. Their work would be impeded."

"Their work...which was once *our* work. Human work." Now it was Kuan's turn to smile pleasantly, even as his eyes held a thinly veiled disdain. "But of course we do not need to work anymore, now that we have these magnificent genetically engineered creatures to do our work for us, to keep our cities functioning. Instead, we can spend every moment of the day living virtually on the Link while our bodies rot away, neglected. We can become *zombies*. The living dead."

Mayor Reeves cleared his throat. "Would you look at that?" He held up his glass. "Empty already!"

Lennox didn't turn his gaze from Kuan. "Help yourself, Mayor."

Reeves reached forward, interrupting the staring contest between Lennox and Kuan as he grabbed for the wine bottle at the center of the table.

"Don't mind if I do!" His fingers trembled as he grasped the bottle by the throat. A frozen grin stretched his face, but there was unmasked apprehension behind his glassy eyes as he glanced at Lennox. "Always the good stuff here at The Pearl!"

"So glad you like it. I'll have George send a bottle home with you." Lennox sipped from his own glass and watched the holy man across from him.

*Tell me, Mr. Kuan, what sort of blades do you have hidden up those baggy sleeves? Are you just waiting for the opportune moment to slash our throats and institute your brand of archaic theocracy here in NewCity?*

"You make a good point," he conceded at length. "But think about it. Where would we be without them? Can you even imagine what our city would be like if those *zombies* were the ones running the train station or the hospital or even the corner diner? Just think of the chaos that would ensue. People like us are not interested in the service jobs held by synthetics. We have more important things to do. And the undesirables are too far-gone to do their part anymore."

"You must see the connection, Mr. Lennox. Do you not?"

"Between the Link and the SYNs?"

Kuan nodded adamantly. "If there were no Link, then we would have no need for these soulless creatures. With them, we have no need for the lives we once led, and so our minds become consumed by the Link while these synthetics perform the duties we were once responsible for ourselves."

"It is a...*vicious cycle*," Yeng added.

"I find it interesting that you include yourselves in their predicament." Lennox paused, smiling at their perplexed expressions. "You say *we*. You associate yourselves with the zombies."

Kuan's dark eyes were grim. "We may separate ourselves from the mainstream of society, but we are not far-removed. Our hearts break for the *predicament*, as you say,

of these unfortunate men and women. They are our brothers and sisters, even as they are unaware of this truth. We all are children of the Master."

"As you are, Mr. Lennox," Yeng said brightly. "You are our brother, as well."

"Welcome to the family," Reeves toasted, draining his second glass.

Lennox attempted a bow in his seat. "I'm honored. Consider me your token black sheep." He waved his hand at their baffled expressions. "Never mind," he chuckled. *Time to shift gears.* "So, gentlemen, how long do you plan to stay in town?"

Yeng deferred to Kuan, who answered, "The remainder of this week, with many thanks to Mayor Reeves for his generosity and hospitality." He bowed to the mayor as did Yeng, each with a humble countenance. Did they practice in front of the same mirror?

"Not at all, not at all," Reeves attempted to bow in return, but his protruding gut didn't allow for much mobility. "Just doing my part here in facilitating the *Revival*. We want NewCity to be a place where everybody feels welcome, you know? SYN, Zombie, Human, Way-Follower, You-Name-It. This is the only place to be, right, Gavin?" He winked at Lennox, then hoisted his empty glass. "To The Pearl—a literal pearl amongst swine!"

"Yes," Kuan nodded, turning his gaze toward the dance floor below where tuxedos and glamorous dresses weaved about to the upbeat BigBand music. He watched them, but his eyes didn't focus on anyone in particular.

Lennox drained his glass and stood to excuse himself. It was abrupt, he knew, but there were matters that required his tending. He would have to wait for a more opportune time to speak with the mayor one-on-one.

"Consider this a standing invitation. Anytime you're in the neighborhood, feel free to drop by." He glanced at the

two wine glasses ignored by the holy men. "Drinks on the house."

"Leaving us so soon?" Yeng looked confused. Kuan didn't turn from the view. It had hypnotized him.

"Mr. Lennox is a very busy man, of course. We're lucky to have held his attention this long!" Mayor Reeves laughed uproariously, shoulders bouncing.

"I'll have George bring up another bottle." Lennox extended his right hand as he clapped Reeves on the back.

The mayor shook his hand, chuckles subsiding. "Thanks, thanks. And I'll have it all to myself, by the looks of things!" Another fit of laughter.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Lennox," Yeng said as he stood to bow. Lennox returned the gesture. "This establishment is an amazing achievement. We look forward with great anticipation to hearing more of your plans for NewCity's development in the near future."

"Definitely." Lennox flashed his smile again. He turned to Kuan—

Suddenly standing beside him.

"May I walk with you, Mr. Lennox?"

Uncertainty tightened Lennox's abdomen. "Of course." His smile returned as he retreated a step and swept out his arm toward the stairs. "After you."

Kuan bowed once to the mayor, then strode away from the table with his hands tucked into the generous sleeves of his robe.

"Gentlemen," Lennox nodded to Reeves and Yeng, then moved abreast of Kuan. "No hard feelings, I trust."

"Of course not, Mr. Lennox. As a Follower of the Way, I am accustomed to fielding differences of opinion. It is only my hope that through our discussion, I may have opened the eyes of your heart to another way of thinking—a more *humane* way."

"Rest assured, Mr. Ti, your words did not go unheeded."

Kuan turned to fix him with a thoughtful stare. "I pray so."

They reached the top of the stairs. Lennox had assumed that's where the holy man would turn back; but instead, he descended at his side, matching his steady pace. *What does he want?* Lennox glanced sidelong at Kuan's baggy sleeves. A mental image returned of that white monk in the alley, flying through the air, striking the heads from those unsuspecting mandroids, deflecting the bullets fired at him point-blank.

*Get a grip.*

Here. Not there. This was a completely different reality. Not The Pit. The Pearl. Here, Lennox was a respectable public figure. Here, the world made sense. It was civilized. There was no monk-assassin heading his way—as far as he knew.

Even so, he found his fingers sliding into his pocket, fingering the cold silver finish of the cigarette lighter. A quick escape was that close, if he needed it.

"Mr. Lennox, if you would be so kind..." Kuan lowered his voice. "In which direction is the—how do you say—the—?" He frowned at the floor.

*The restroom? Is that all he wants?*

Lennox gestured toward the left as they reached the second tier. "At the end of the hall—the one marked MALES."

Kuan's expression brightened. "Ah. Yes," he noted the location. "Thank you." He paused. "Would you care to join me?"

Lennox could feel his tight smile falter. "I really should be getting back to—"

"This will not take long. There is something I would very much like you to see."

Lennox would have laughed, it was so absurd. *I don't swing that way.* But the look in Kuan's eyes was serious.

"Any reason you can't show me right here?"

"He is not here."

"Who?"

"The boy."

*Children aren't allowed*— "What are you talking about?"

Kuan stepped toward the hallway and restrooms beyond. "Join me. Please."

The servers passed in a steady stream, a Sally or a George here and there, carrying platters of tinkling glass to and from the tables on this level. Fresh tuxedos and sparkling dresses made their way down to the dance floor; others damp with perspiration returned to their seats to cool off, knock back a few more drinks. On any other night, Lennox would have been pleased. So many orders meant one thing: plenty of credit downloading into his reservoirs.

But tonight was not like any other night. If he could trace things back to the moment when this timeline had been interrupted, when the equilibrium in his gut was thrown off...

*Cyrus Horton.* When Horton had shown up earlier that evening, responding to the message Lennox had posted on the Link. *I have only myself to blame.*

The same was true now as he followed the monk into the dark hallway, lit only by white glow strips along the floor. Lennox could have turned back, made a more convincing excuse. He didn't. Instead he gripped the cigarette lighter and removed it from his pocket, kept it in his closed fist, down at his side.

"Mr. Lennox!" The George at the urinal zipped up. He was not the only one in the MALES room, but he was the first to recognize Lennox standing just inside the door with the holy man beside him, both seeming out of place. Others soon became aware of their presence and stopped, stared, voices dying off and leaving streams of splattering urine to echo against the walls of the spacious white room.

Lennox had to think fast. "Good evening." He allowed a confident smile to stretch his face, the one he used to put others at ease. "I'm afraid I have to ask you all to leave at this time. Mr. Ti is a guest of our esteemed Mayor Reeves,

and it's against Mr. Ti's religion to use the restroom while others are...using it. So, if you please." He stepped back to usher them outside. "There are other facilities located on the dance floor level as well as near the entrance."

"Of course, Mr. Lennox." George nodded soberly, averting his eyes from the monk with what appeared to be respect. He gestured toward the others. "Let's go, gentlemen."

Lennox nodded, pleased with George for following his lead.

The other men and SYNs filed out quickly, emptying the restroom with curious backward glances. The door slid shut behind them, and the room was silent save for the whir of the air purifiers in the ceiling.

"Lock the door, please," Kuan said.

Lennox folded his arms. "Whatever it is you need to show me, let's get it over with."

Kuan glided across the tiled floor, headed toward the long row of stalls with white doors left ajar. "You will not want someone to stumble in upon us."

He approached the stall at the very end, the one with the closed door. OCCUPIED glowed from the display.

"I'll be the judge of that." Lennox remained rooted where he stood.

"Very well." Kuan glanced at him, and what looked like a half-smile turned back his thin lips. Then his hands were out in the open, freed from his sleeves, and he launched himself upward, vaulting over the stall's locked door and disappearing inside.

*What the hell?*

In spite of himself, Lennox started forward, staring. Another acrobatic monk? This did not bode well.

"You're trying my patience, Mr. Ti." His voice echoed as if he were the last man standing in what remained of a sane world. He fingered the cold cigarette lighter.



"I beg your indulgence." The stall door clicked, flashed VACANT as it slid open, and Kuan emerged, struggling as he carried out a small boy bound hand and foot. Unconscious. Set down on the tiles like so much baggage. "But as you can see, I spoke the truth."

Lennox's perspective of the room shifted, zooming to focus on the limp body lying on the floor. "What's the meaning of this?" *Is he dead?* Impulsively, Lennox backed away and locked the door to the restroom with his palm against the sensor grate. He glared at the holy man but kept his distance.

Kuan strode forward, leaving the boy behind. The kid's frail shoulder rose with each shallow breath. "You reap what you have sown, Mr. Lennox." Kuan's eyes burned with intensity. "You sow to the wind, you will reap the whirlwind!" He gestured back toward the body curled on the floor. "You do not know who this is. You would never have known. But here he is. You killed his father. He saw it happen with his own eyes."

*Horton...had a son?* Lennox stared down at the boy, black hair damp and tousled, narrow wrists cinched together.

He narrowed his gaze at Kuan. "What do you want?" This was extortion at its best. He could feel it, whether the claims were true or false, and he knew what came next: demands.

"You are a very influential man, Mr. Lennox," Kuan conceded. In his eyes, there was now a deep sadness. "You have it within your power to do much good, to resurrect NewCity, to heal the wounds left by the Plague and all else that you and your people have suffered. Yet there is something more that drives you. It is something which causes you to do *horrible* things. It darkens your soul."

Lennox almost laughed. "Stop screwing around. You can quit the pious act and tell me what you want." *The damn hypocrite.*

Of course, he had no inclination to give this *holy man* anything. But he needed to know what was going on here before he called in one of the mandroids to paint the tiles in a fresh coat of blood.

Kuan paused, holding his gaze. "This boy was not alone when he saw you murder his father. There was another, a man who will come looking for the boy. And it is this man, a dangerous one, you will have to reckon with when the time comes."

"Right now I'm *reckoning* with you, Mr. Ti."

"Indeed you are, Mr. Lennox. And allow me to say I fully realize that my life is in your hands. Cyrus Horton was not the first person you have ended in pursuit of your own interests, and I now stand in his place. My life is expendable. As is this boy's. Yet know this: if you kill either of us, it will be your undoing. You will reap the whirlwind, indeed." He took a step forward, lowering his voice. "But it need not be this way."

*Finally.* Lennox arched his brow with mock interest.

"You alone can save this city and its people," Kuan said. "There is no one else in your position. Despite your checkered past, you have been chosen by the Master for such a time as this. Like any man, you are capable of great evil, but that is not all. You have proven that you are more than a mere gangster. You have reinvented yourself, and you stand at the brink of historical greatness. If you put your misdeeds behind you and commit to use your power and influence for good here in NewCity, for the saving of many souls now addicted to the Link and all of its vices, then my brother and I can give you our word. Neither this boy nor his protector will ever harm your reputation in any way."

Lennox smiled, amused. "So that's the best you can come up with? My *reputation*?" He shook his head, annoyed. "Please. The fact that I've never allowed anyone to stand in my way is a major keystone of my reputation. Really, Mr. Ti.

You should have done your homework before trying this stunt."

The holy man tucked his hands into the sleeves drooping across his middle and bowed his head. "I have said what I must. It lies within your power, Mr. Lennox, to rescue NewCity's people from their Linked prisons. But if you would not be this city's savior...then do with me as you will."

He stood as one awaiting his execution. Lennox didn't plan to disappoint. But first there was a matter to clarify, something noteworthy the monk had shared during his futile, self-righteous tirade.

"Who is he, this fellow you spoke of?" Lennox glanced down at the boy. The mandroid would dispose of him as well. "This boy's *protector*?"

Kuan did not raise his head. "I only saw him take the child off the street after your machines killed his father. To protect him from you."

"You said he was dangerous. You must know more."

"I cannot say."

Lennox clenched his jaw, and the muscle twitched. *Cannot, or will not?* "It would be prudent to answer me."

"I am a dead man already, Mr. Lennox. What is the ancient Western saying? Dead men tell no tales."

*Cute.*

"As you wish." Lennox looked at the palm of his hand as his fingers uncurled. The silver sheen of the cigarette lighter inspired a smile to play on his lips. *Why not?* "I'd like to show you something now, Mr. Ti. To return the favor."

Kuan did not respond.

Lennox stepped forward. He flipped the cap off the lighter and the flame leapt upward hungrily. He looked down into the flickering light for just a moment as he drew close to the holy man.

"Look here."

With his head bowed, it was impossible to tell if Kuan's eyes were open or closed. Lennox moved the flame under his

nose, close enough to singe the short hairs in his nostrils. Kuan drew back with a sudden start.

"I do not smoke!"

Lennox smirked at that. "Neither do I."

He grabbed Kuan by the throat and squeezed, lifting him onto his toes.

"Gaze into the light with me, Mr. Ti. Tell me what you see." He held the lighter between their faces and tightened his grip until Kuan's darting eyes came to reflect the flickering flame in their constricting pupils. "Now watch closely..."

The holy man's hands clawed at the grip on his throat. He wheezed, unable to breathe. But he looked. And as he gazed into the flame spurting up from the lighter, Kuan Ti noticed the air around him change. It moved like water, reflecting and refracting the light of the restroom. A substance between mirror and glass, some sort of otherworldly mercurial fluid that rippled in place, standing there expectantly as if it had been summoned.

"Like what you see?" Lennox hissed with a malevolent grin.

Kuan felt the pressure against his throat tighten, and then he was hurled across the room. A blast of bone-aching cold swept over him before he hit the floor, as though he had passed through a ring of fire—no, frost. He had never felt anything like it. Broken tiles slick with fresh urine and vomit met his hands as he caught himself, falling hard.

Lennox stood backlit against fluorescent tubes that flickered above cracked mirrors. He laughed at Kuan.

"Welcome to The Pit, Mr. Ti!"

As if on cue, men in the stalls nearby emptied their stomachs into the toilets in unison, missing, slopping the foul contents onto the floor instead, groaning in a chorus dedicated to the wonders of the latest pharmaceutical

cocktail. Kuan cringed, his eyes wide and darting, mouth gaping, unable to articulate a single word.

"There should be no shortage of potential converts for you here!" Lennox said.

Kuan swallowed, his throat dry, tight. "What... What sort of devilry is this?" He gasped, unable to rise. "What is this place?"

Lennox folded his arms and shrugged. "I like to think of it as the *other side*—has a certain ring to it. What do you say?" He capped the lighter, extinguishing the flame.

The other men in the restroom erupted again, gagging and spitting. One staggered out of his stall and managed to make it to the sink before he doubled over violently with another bout. Oblivious to the club's owner or the monk cowering on the floor behind him, he looked like a wayward youth. Pale, pierced, tattooed and unwashed. A *zombie*.

"What have you done? Where—?" Kuan was having difficulty accepting the reality of the situation. "What have you done with the boy?"

"As if you care. He was only a means to an end, wasn't he?" Lennox cursed the monk. "He's not here. He's out cold on the floor, right where you left him. Which reminds me." Lennox squatted down, pulling up the hem of his tuxedo jacket to keep it from getting anywhere near the floor. "Since when has kidnapping been part of your cult's *mysterious ways*?"

Kuan had no answer. It had been wrong to use the child in this way, to try to force a man like Gavin Lennox to do what was right for his city. One life versus the lives of so many had seemed like an acceptable risk. But now Kuan knew he would never forgive himself for such a horrifying lapse in judgment. He should not have brought the child to The Pearl.

But what was this disgusting place?

*Where am I?*

Lennox waited for Kuan to reply, but the monk had lost his tongue again. "No matter. I'll ask the kid myself."

He flipped the cap off the lighter and the flame leapt upward to greet him. He winked down at the holy man and turned his back on him as the air changed again, undulating like a murky pool.

"You cannot leave me here!" Kuan struggled to his feet, his movements rigid with terror.

"Don't worry." Lennox chuckled without looking back. "I shall return."

As he stepped through the breach, the room around him changed. The raccoon-eyed ghouls heaving into the sink dissolved into the air, and the layers of grime on the walls, the floor, even the ceiling were whitewashed away to become the spotless MALES restroom on The Pearl's second tier. There lay the boy in the middle of the pristine floor tiles, unconscious and alone.

The clink of the lighter cap echoed as Lennox pocketed it and glanced back at the restroom door. Still locked. Stifling a cold shudder, he stepped toward the boy in a halting stride. There was no right way to go about this.

"Hey." He crouched down and jostled the kid's shoulder. The rough fabric was cold and damp. It was raining tonight—hard, from what he recalled. The boy had been out in it for a while, by the looks of him.

*You killed his father. He saw it happen with his own eyes.*

Maybe he had, at that. "Hey."

The boy stirred, eyelids flickering beneath locks of bedraggled dark hair. One pupil shone through the twisted strands and widened.

"Easy." Lennox retracted his hand as the kid thrashed against the cords on his wrists and ankles.

"What the hell!" his voice echoed wildly as he writhed on the tile floor.

"Just take it easy—"

"Screw you, freak!"

"I'm not the bad guy here, kid. That would be the monk who left you like this." Lennox waited for the boy to pause and listen. "I found you in here. But if you want, I'll leave."

The boy cursed, fighting against his bonds once more before giving up. For now. "Where am I?"

"The Pearl. In the restroom." He noted the change that came over the boy's face.

"The Pearl..." Horror and rage in equal measure flashed through the eye behind his ragged hair. It focused on Lennox's tuxedo. "Who are you?"

"I work here."

The boy seemed to accept his answer. He raised his bound wrists. "Can you help me out?"

"Of course." Lennox reached forward and took the knotted cords in hand. A knife would have made short work of this, but he had time to spare. And a question or two while the knots begrudgingly yielded. "So tell me, what do you remember? How'd you end up here?"

"I was—" He stopped himself. "This guy in white—there were two of them. They...took me."

"From your home?"

"No. I wasn't...home."

"Wet out there tonight. A real mess. They could have snatched you off the street without anyone noticing, I suppose."

"I was—" he started, as if for a moment he'd remembered. Then he replied, defeated, "I don't know where I was."

Lennox arched his brow. "Really?" The cords on the boy's wrists came free, and he started rubbing them to get the circulation going. "Sounds like you've had a rotten night."

"You have no idea." The boy sat up, kept his eyes downcast as he pushed out his bound ankles for Lennox to untie. His small fingers were still too numb to be much help.

"Why'd they want you—these *guys in white*?"

"Freakin' perverts, probably."

Lennox had to chuckle at that. "Yeah. Probably." He focused on the knot between his fingers. "Would you like me to Link up anybody for you—your dad, maybe?"

The boy flinched. "No." His voice choked against his will. He coughed, hanging his head. "No, I'll just...go home."

Lennox watched him. "You're sure there's nobody I should call, let them know you're ok?" What about his *protector*?

"No, it's all right." He tried to keep his eyes hidden behind his hair, but that one stubborn pupil shone through, roving along the tuxedo before him with an acute awareness of detail. "What's your name, mister?"

"Gavin." Lennox smiled. The ankles were free. He stood and backed away as he coiled the two lengths of cord and pocketed them. "You?"

The boy massaged his sore ankles, waiting before he tried them out under his full weight. "Harry," he said without looking up.

Lennox palmed the sensor grate beside the door, unlocking it. The boy didn't notice.

"Pleased to meet you, Harry." He thrust both hands deep into the pockets of his slacks. The fingertips of his right hand brushed the polished silver of the lighter. "So. Are you up for a tour of The Pearl?"

An unguarded look of revulsion flooded Harry's expression. "No thanks, mister."

"Call me Gavin." Lennox smiled.

It was the dream of every kid in NewCity to one day, as an adult citizen, hold the credit necessary to enjoy all that The Pearl had to offer. They could only imagine the exclusive wonders that took place behind its doors. *But this little guy isn't like every other kid in town. No, not at all.*

He was apparently the son of the world's most infamous scientist: the man who had harnessed the power of negative



energy to invent time travel, not to mention a means of traversing the multiverse. A real genius for the ages. Too bad living in hiding had taken such a toll on him.

From what Lennox had witnessed earlier that night, the old geezer had lost his wits. He'd been little more than a fragile shadow of his former self. Unfortunate that the kid had to see him ripped in half, but these things often couldn't be helped.

Lennox was known to act rashly on rare occasions, and tonight that old fool had tried his patience. Perhaps when he had it to do over again—once the BackTracker was firmly in his possession—Lennox wouldn't kill Horton. He'd keep him around as a court jester or something equally amusing. Give him a quantum singularity to play with.

Regardless, the boy knew more than he was letting on. And whether he wanted to or not, he was going to tell Lennox all of it.

## SEVEN

Cade looked at the face of Cyrus Horton not as one who has seen a ghost, but as one who cannot believe he is seeing the specter-made-flesh standing before his eyes.

"Mr. Horton..." His voice trailed off.

Horton smiled, creases folding away from rows of crowded teeth. He reached forward to clap Cade on the shoulder. "Good to see you, lad."

"I do not understand—"

"Plenty of time later for storytelling. Right now, we've gotta get out of sight. The locals will be more than curious if we don't skedaddle toot-sweet." The handheld light clicked off, and his face vanished into the ambient dark, but his voice came a step closer. "Stay close now, Cade. Peter, Paul—lead the way."

Horton gripped Cade's shoulder with a vigorous strength, and he felt himself pushed and pulled along as invisible feet around him surged forward, running through the darkness, dashing first to the left, then to the right, switching from side to side as if dodging unseen obstacles. Twice Cade nearly stumbled, but he caught himself, aided by strong hands at his side.

"Where are we going?" he managed, his voice low.

"Someplace safe." Horton did not sound out of breath as he whispered, "She said you'd be hot on her trail. We went out to find you as fast as we could. And a good thing, too. The freaks have been raising hell in these tunnels all week, and their bloodletting is getting out of control. Seems they're getting restless." A short chuckle. "Maybe they've figured out they don't really belong here."

Cade did not feel fear, only confusion.

"I know you've got questions," Horton said. "I'll do my best to iron them out for you, once we're safe and sound."

Cade nodded in the dark. He accepted the fact that they were in danger. He had been from the moment he left the Gatekeeper and ventured deep into this hell-hole. At any moment, he expected to hear the excited squeal of the first cannibal who caught sight of them, eyes accustomed to the dark and following their every twist and turn, its teeth, painstakingly honed into fangs, dripping with saliva at the prospect of a fresh kill.

Then there would be others. Their shrieks of delight would echo like a chorus of demons in the bowels of a subterranean cathedral. Cade would dispatch all that he could with his blade, but he and these silent runners with him would be outnumbered and overwhelmed in a matter of minutes, despite their best efforts against such ruthless assailants.

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...I will fear no evil.*

He did not fear the darkness thriving Underground, nor death itself. He did not dread meeting his Master. No follower of the Way would. It was not desire for a safe haven from the bloodthirsty residents of these long-forgotten subway tunnels that drove him through the dark. It was a desire to reach the one human being he had sworn his life to protect: Irena Muldoon. For her, he would have stormed the very gates of Hell. She was his charge, and until the day she was reunited with her husband, he would hold himself entirely responsible for her life.

"Get down!" Horton tugged on Cade's shoulder with sudden ferocity, and the invisible feet of the others fell silent. "Anything?"

The hoarse voice that had quoted the holy scriptures earlier came from a meter off to the left. "Unless these lenses fail me, we're alone."

Did he wear the same goggles as the Gatekeeper, able to pierce the darkness?

"We must wait to be sure," came the resonant baritone from his right.

"One of our back doors," Horton explained in a whisper close to Cade's ear. "We've lost three of them in the past month due to the buggers getting too curious. Can't let 'em do that. Anytime they do, we've got to seal it up and make a new one. Gets rather inconvenient after a while, I've gotta say."

Again Cade nodded. He did not know if Horton could see him in the dark, but he was determined to appear attentive. This was, after all, the man who had requested his services as bodyguard for the estranged daughter he had not spoken to in years. As Cade served Irena Muldoon by guarding her life, he also served Cyrus Horton.

"What do you think?" the lilting female voice came from behind him.

"The coast is clear," said the hoarse voice.

"We should wait a little longer," the deep voice murmured.

"They're nowhere in sight," retorted the hoarse voice. "We're good to go."

Silence. No one wanted to be the first to move. The deafening black threatened to turn them into stone for all eternity.

"I hear no one in pursuit," Cade said. He trusted his senses, those which doubled their efforts when his eyes became useless. They had yet to fail him. "We are alone here. For now."

"Good enough for me!" Horton squeezed his shoulder with another quiet laugh. "Now Peter, if you would do the honors."

The invisible figure on the left stirred, and heavy steel scraped against matter of the same density, rotating by the sound of it.

"This way, lad." Horton gave Cade's shoulder a tug upward and leftward. "Watch your head."

What could have been a hatch of some kind creaked, and Cade was led through the black into a space where the air was thicker but less foul. Invisible footsteps padded all around him, and he felt their bodies brush against him. They were entering a confined space.

The creak came again behind them, followed by the metallic scraping, rotating like a wheel on the hatch of a bunker, locking into place with a resounding clunk.

"We can risk a bit of light now." The flashlight clicked on in Horton's hand. He directed its beam down a long corridor toward dark recesses in the distance. The neglected catacombs of a dusty concrete city. "This way."

The bobbing light led them onward, shining its wide, hollow eye before them. Cade followed close behind Horton, and the others were shadowy figures on his heel. They moved down to the end of the corridor, passing open passageways on either side, until they reached a doorway on the right.

They stepped into a dark, oblong room. The light swept across tables, chairs, and strange equipment with dead screens and blinking pinpoints of light, as if the machines were on standby. From where did they receive their power?

"If you would, Peter." Horton clicked off the light, dropping a black curtain on the room.

"Yes, sir," the deep voice rumbled.

Another door creaked shut, and another wheel scraped steel across steel. Rubber bands snapped from two locations in the darkness, and Cade again remembered the goggles worn by the Gatekeeper. There was a pause, a moment of silence. Then someone flipped a switch, and the room exploded in a blast of blinding white.

Cade closed his eyes, held up a hand instinctively against the glare of the bulbs in the ceiling. All around him,

the machines whirled to life, shifting gears as they woke up. Cyrus Horton chuckled.

"Welcome to my secret laboratory!" He slapped Cade on the back. "Takes a few seconds, but you'll get used to it. Like walking out of a matinee into the afternoon sun, isn't it?"

Cade did not recognize the word *matinee*, but the brilliance of the lights could easily be compared to the sun in all its strength.

"Is she here?" He lowered his hand.

Horton smiled, the deep lines at the corners of his eyes a tribute to his blithe nature. "Yes. But she's sleeping." He gestured toward a closed door at the far end of the room. It looked solid, as did the one they had entered through, now locked from the inside. "She'll be glad to know you're all right. Not an easy thing, eluding those Blackshirt devils. But then again, you've got some skills, haven't you?" He grinned knowingly. "That you have, that you have."

"May I see her?"

Horton shook his head, and the smile faded. "We'll let her get some rest for now. Lord knows she needs it." The smile returned. "Besides, I've got to introduce you to my kids!" He guided Cade with a hand on the back of his soiled robe, no longer the stark white it had once been. "The big one's Peter." He gestured to the black man who bowed once at his introduction, broad features stoic.

"Welcome," Peter rumbled with a hand over his heart.

Cade bowed in return.

"The scrawny one's Paul." Horton chuckled again as he pointed out the frail, stoop-shouldered man who appeared to be the eldest in the room by a decade or few.

"Pleased to meet you," Paul replied hoarsely, eyes darting. He seemed agitated. A pair of goggles dangled from the gnarled fingers of his right hand and swung to and fro.

"And this beauty," Horton beamed, "is Mary. That's right: Peter, Paul, and Mary!" He laughed out loud, his

shoulders rocking. "After seeing them in concert, I couldn't resist!"

"Glad I am to make your acquaintance, Mr. Cade." Mary stepped forward with a delicate smile and bright eyes, her small white hand outstretched. But she caught herself. Instead of reaching for his hand, she bowed.

Cade returned the gesture without a word, despite the direct look she fixed upon him.

"Didn't know Irena had such an array of siblings, did you?" Horton patted Cade's shoulder absently.

"No," Cade said. They could not possibly be related. They looked nothing like her, nor her father. Nor each other.

"Well, when I say they're my kids, I suppose I should clarify. I'm their father—their *creator*. We've got a trickle of the same blood flowing through our veins, but we're not blood relations in the traditional sense. Have I succeeded in perplexing you royally?"

"They are SYNs." Cade looked at them, studying each one standing before him. They stared back without expression.

Horton nodded. "Yes...and no. They don't hail from SYNCorp's factories, if that's what you're thinking. Same genetic sequencing—I might've borrowed SYNCorp's source code from Alpha Geminorum before I quit. But I'm improving it, working out the kinks to override their expiration dates. None of those cookie-cutter models for me, no sir. You ever notice how Ashland Solomon's synthetics all look the same? Sure, they might dress different or do their hair or tattoo and paint themselves to look like ghouls, but each one's engineered from a grand total of five variations. Not much creativity there, if you ask me." He shook his head in disgust. "But my kids, they're the most unique synthetics you're ever going to meet. Aren't they freakin' *cool*? I mean, check 'em out!"

Cade turned his gaze sidelong toward the inventor, whose peculiar verbiage eluded him. "I would not have

guessed it."

"Right?" Horton clapped his hands, his applause echoing against the bare concrete walls and ceiling. "That's the idea! Put models like these out there, topside, and nobody will be able to tell the difference. They look human, don't they? Hell, these three could even get themselves fitted with plugs—nobody would turn them down. No second-class citizen status for them!" His smile dropped away. "Not that I'm all about supporting the Link, mind you. Look—" He turned his head quickly and pointed out the scar behind his ear. "Had mine taken out years ago. It's not about that. It's about..." He fixed Cade with a desperate stare. "It's about screwing them over, the powers that be. You know? Really sticking it to them, showing 'em what's what!"

Cade did his best to follow Horton's line of thought, even as it seemed to zigzag without any sense of direction. "In return for their canceling your research."

"They shut me down, that's a fact. But it's not about revenge. Is that what you think? I'm not out to get even. Hell, they didn't stop my work!" He frowned. "Is that what people are saying up there? That the government shut me down for good? Far from it!"

He scurried toward one of the tables in the center of the room, nearly buried beneath mounds of random electronic parts and stray wires, glowing nuclear cells, and the insides of what appeared to be outdated computer systems, ravaged beyond recognition.

"Come here, come here. You've gotta see this."

Cade glanced at the SYNs. They watched him closely. The one named Mary continued to smile at him, almost as if she were attempting to seduce his attention. He turned away from them and approached the inventor's side.

"See here?" Horton held up what looked like a silver cigarette lighter—only its cap was missing, and there was no flame. Instead, a strange vaporous glow emanated from inside its core.



"Smoking is illegal," Cade replied, matter-of-fact.

"Yes, it is. And so was my research. Ever hear of Schrödinger's cat? Alternate dimensions of reality? Brane theory? The multiverse?"

Cade shook his head, staring at the lighter's glow, mesmerized by it.

"That's why they shut me down. My research into the *alter-life*. But I liked to think of it as *alter-lives*. Really, when you come right down to it, who's to say how many there are? Infinite possibilities. It's exponential—a single decision made, a single choice, a single turning point that could go either way, maybe in more than two directions, but then each of those outcomes will come to a head later on, and another decision will have to be made, another set of outcomes, and so on, and so on, indefinitely. You see?" His eyes gleamed with an intensity that burned bright and clear, but gradually faded, replaced by a look of sad nostalgia. "So many realities, pulling against the fabric of space-time... Too many to count. Thought experiment become truth, by my hand. Perhaps I was naïve." He sighed heavily, nodding to himself with what appeared to be regret. "Perhaps."

Cade parted his lips to speak, yet he could not respond. Horton had lost him. This strange glow held him now, and he stared into it, unable to pull his eyes away, unable to blink. Without meaning to do so, he leaned toward it, as if it was reaching out to him, drawing him closer with a magnetism he could not resist.

"Careful there, lad." Horton covered the lighter with his hand, and instantly Cade found himself able to focus, dropping back from the table onto his bare heels. "You might not like where you end up."

Cade met the inventor's amused gaze. "What is it?"

Horton nodded, smiling. "A key to a door you never knew existed."

Cade shook his head. "I do not understand."

"I've always said it's amazing what's possible when the government's collective nose is out of your ass. Seriously, if they'd just let us do our thing without all those restrictions and regulations, it'd be awesome what we could accomplish! I'm only scratching the surface here, dabbling with theoretical polymers and whatnot, materials that don't officially exist. Negative energy, though, that's been the key to everything. Compressing it via nanotechnology and channeling it to puncture holes through space-time, capturing and expanding tunnels through the quantum foam and stabilizing them long enough to—" He stopped himself. "Listen to me ramble. Now you know what my kids have to put up with!"

"I am..." Cade could not finish. *Impressed? Appalled?* Irena had always said her father was a great man, a misunderstood genius mistreated by the governors who used him up and spat him out. His designs had been utilized by the military for years in the Eurasian Wars, but when he had switched his research into another area, this *alter-life* he spoke of, then the government wanted nothing to do with him. Was he no longer of any use to them? Or did it run deeper: Had they known what he managed to create? Did they think he was dangerous?

Or was he insane? Perhaps the lighter was simply a lighter—yet almost identical to the one Lennox had used prior to disappearing into the air. Was there a connection? And perhaps these three very unique synthetics were not manufactured beings at all, but humans, friends who cared for the old man and tolerated his claims as would the staff of any mental hospital run by followers of the Way.

"Now check this out." Horton held up what looked like a plastic timepiece, the kind minors wore on their wrists, being too young to have a Link interface of their own. "This would have to be my crowning achievement, if there ever was such a thing. The one that started it all." He raised the watch with

both hands as if he were conducting a coronation. "The BackTracker."

Cade prayed silently for wisdom. *The BackTracker—the man Irena searches for. The only one who can possibly find Harold Muldoon...*

"What does it do?" he feigned interest, for now humoring the inventor, even as his mind raced with a sudden revelation: Would Horton know how to find Irena's husband? Was *Horton* the BackTracker?

Horton shook his head slowly with admiration, his eyes locked on the timepiece. "This one's special, let me tell you. No crossing the membrane between realities. With the BackTracker, you get to actually *go back*. Hence the name. Get it?" He lowered his voice and leaned in toward Cade. "You get to *backtrack* your own life." He paused, waiting for that to sink in. "It's a freakin' time machine, my boy!"

Cade stared at the watch. With this device, if it actually worked, would he be able to locate Harold Muldoon? A man missing for ten years?

"Leaves you a little speechless, doesn't it? Yeah, I know. Sometimes I amaze myself. I mean, who knew the fabric of space-time could be so malleable, so accessible! In an age where advancements in nanotechnology allow an atom bomb to be placed on a lapel pin, this little wristwatch carries enough negative energy to create a squeezed vacuum state, opening a wormhole and keeping it from collapsing long enough to travel back in time. That's right, the BackTracker allows you to detect, capture, stabilize, and enlarge a tunnel through the quantum foam that exists all around us, invisible to the naked eye. A bubble enshrouds you, protecting you while it carries you through folded space-time to whatever date you choose—as long as the technology existed at that point in history. No visiting the Pharaohs! It's really revolutionary, when you come right down to it. Gonna change the world..." He frowned abruptly, and a dark look crossed his features. "Already has, I mean."

Silence held the room. Cade glanced back at the SYNs and noted their downcast eyes. He turned back to Horton. All of the levity was gone. His face sagged now with despair. He seemed lost.

"How so?" Cade broke the silence.

Horton's lips moved, but they said nothing. His eyes darted as he began to mumble, words jumbled, incoherent: "So many mistakes. I had no idea what was really happening, and it's getting thin, far too thin. The fabric will tear—too many realities! Schrödinger's cat was theoretical, the multiverse nothing more than a *What if?* thought experiment. But the BackTracker has made it *real*, don't you see? My mistake, my mistake. I fixed it, I thought I did, but it's happening all over again—" Horton grabbed Cade's hands and thrust the wristwatch into them. "Here. You have to take this, you have to go. You have to go back and get to him before it's too late."

Cade politely refused, retracting his hands, rejecting the timepiece.

"You must!" Horton hissed, eyes wide, tendons straining against the collar of his shirt. He pressed the watch into Cade's hands. "You have to stop him!"

His wild echo held the moment until silence again descended on the room, reclaiming it. Horton closed Cade's hands around the BackTracker and squeezed them, staring into his eyes.

Something clattered behind the closed door at the back of the room.

"I'll go check on her," Mary offered, striding away.

"She mustn't know," Horton grated out through clenched teeth. "She must never know."

"Who?" Cade watched him. Something was very wrong about this situation. He did not remember Cyrus Horton being prone to such emotional outbursts. Or rambling speech.

"Irena. She can't know, it would tear her apart. Harry's not a monster—he just doesn't realize what he's done. There are no isolated incidents," he emphasized each word. "No coincidences. Everything occurs for a reason, and you can't change the past. Doesn't matter how noble your intentions are. The road to hell is paved with 'em. You can't alter history, or you risk destroying everything we know!"

Harry—Harold Muldoon.

"Do you know where he is, Mr. Horton? Do you know where we can find Harold Muldoon?"

How would this news tear her apart? Irena would be overjoyed, overwhelmed with relief to know what had become of her dear husband. For years now, she had lived in misery, awaking every day to a world where the love of her life had vanished without explanation. It was as if he had simply ceased to exist, and the authorities had done very little to aid in the search.

Cyrus Horton tightened his grip on Cade's hands and dropped his gaze.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Where is he?" Cade hoped for the sake of his charge that her father was in full control of his mental faculties—all evidence to the contrary.

"She's waking up," Mary called from the back room, her tone strained.

"Want me to tranq her again?" Peter stepped forward.

Cade turned on him.

The situation had become clear.

He pulled free of Horton's grasp and dropped the watch to the floor, at the same time drawing the sword from his drooping sleeve and bringing the flat of the blade against Peter's chest. The speed with which he had moved held a lasting impression: Peter, Paul, and Horton himself could only stare, wide-eyed.

"You shot her." Cade's voice was even.

"Yes." Horton swallowed. "She would've been a freak's prey, otherwise. We had to get her to safety. She wasn't thinking clearly, coming down here like that, and it was just a tranquilizer—look, I'll show you." The inventor moved to the side of his heavy-laden table.

"Stay where you are." Cade pressed the *kodachi* hard against Peter who stood rooted, eyes fixed on the gleaming blade digging into his broad chest. "You—Mary." Cade turned his gaze on the woman standing at the back of the room.

"Yes, Mr. Cade?" She smiled warmly.

"Bring Mrs. Muldoon out here once she is awake. Until then, do not disturb her."

"Yes, Mr. Cade." She dipped her chin, her bright eyes lingering on him.

"Shut the door, Mary. She does not need to hear this." Cade tightened his grip on the hilt, watching Mary do as he asked.

"What are you going to do?" Paul said hoarsely.

Cade kept his voice low. "I want to know where I can find Harold Muldoon."

Cyrus Horton nodded, his eyes darting from the *kodachi* to the wristwatch on the floor. "That's the only way, lad. You have to *backtrack* him."

"Where is he?" Cade asked. "Tell me where he is, and I will release this SYN of yours, if that is what he truly is."

Peter growled deep within his chest.

"I've told you, it's not *where* you'll find him, but *when*!" Horton took a step forward. "There was a prototype—the first BackTracker I made. It had some kinks to work out, wasn't the most reliable. I lost track of it when the Feds shut me down, it and another item—my first attempts." He gestured at the disorganized table. "They were imperfect, but functional, and somehow he got hold of the BackTracker—or somebody got hold of it for him, something like that. I don't really know how it happened, but it happened. And now he's fraying the time-string, shaping it at will with every trip he

makes into the past, with every alteration resulting from his presence in a time when he doesn't belong! Don't you see? He's changing things that were meant to be, and this world, all the suffering that you see, is the result!" He took another step, clenching his fists. "He must be *stopped* before it's too late."

Cade shook his head. These were the manic delusions of a genius shunned by his superiors, left to grovel Underground and wallow in little more than his own megalomania. None of it was possible, what he spoke of. No mere mortal could exert any control over the essence of time. The Master would not allow it. There were certain boundaries He had put in place at the foundation of the universe, and time was an absolute. It was a river, a mighty rushing force that moved ever forward, carrying all life along from start to finish. There was no swimming back against the current, just as there was no swimming ahead.

*We are in the present at all times...in all time. There is only now.*

"When Mrs. Muldoon awakes, we will take our leave." Cade lowered the short sword from Peter and held it down at his side. For now, he would wait.

"You'll leave when Mr. Horton tells you to leave!" Peter roared, muscles rippling like black snakes across his forearms as he lunged for Cade's throat with both hands, thick fingers curled, tensed, bleeding before he knew why. "What?" He froze, staring as Cade wiped his blade clean on the hem of his soiled robe. "What did you...?" Peter's voice rumbled into empty space as he watched one of his fingers drop to the concrete floor with a dark splatter of blood. Then another fell beside it.

Paul cursed and backed away. "That ain't right!"

Mary giggled in the back of the room.

"You—!" Peter growled with menace, hands tightening into fists—the left one missing its index and middle digits, both stumps bleeding profusely.

"Stand down, Peter," Horton cautioned.

"He thinks he can tell us what's what! Like he's our *better!*" Peter's dark eyes narrowed, big teeth clenched as he grated out, "He has no idea *what* he is!"

"That's enough," Horton reprimanded.

Peter seethed. Flared nostrils inhaled and exhaled.

"Why don't you tell him, Father?" Fury raged in his eyes.

"I said that's enough, Peter. He's already taken two of your fingers, for crying out loud—faster than you could blink! Why provoke him further?" Horton snickered to himself. "You behave now, or I'll think twice about growing replacements for those missing digits."

"If you don't tell him, I will," Peter rumbled, eyes wide. "He must be put in his place!"

Cade bowed without lowering his gaze. "I do not presume to overstep—"

"A little late for that," Paul muttered.

Mary giggled again.

"The welfare of Mrs. Muldoon is my only priority. Of course, it will be her decision to leave, when the time comes. I am but her humble servant. And yours, Mr. Horton." Cade bowed again.

Horton returned the gesture amicably. "Of course. You see that, Peter? Everything's fine and dandy. You don't have to get all excited. He's got a personal space bubble is all. You know what that is? Personal space? I bet you do now." He chuckled. "Be careful, my son. Who knows what he'll slice off next time!"

Peter growled again, so deep he may not have known it was audible to those around him. He ripped off a swath of cloth from the hem of his shirt and bound his wound, his fierce eyes never leaving Cade.

"Has it ever bothered you the way your past is so dark? Unclear? The way you cannot remember even being a child?" Peter spoke as quietly as his voice could couch itself.



He leaned toward Cade without taking another step toward him.

"No, Peter," Horton reprimanded again, as if he were speaking to a child or a pet. His eyes flashed a warning.

It went unheeded.

"Do you know *why* you have this single purpose in life: to protect Irena Muldoon?" Peter laughed now for the first time, rumbling forth like derisive thunder. "Do you know why it has never occurred to you that you are a living paradox? A sword-wielding *holy man*? You go about your life without ever questioning it!"

"It is my purpose," Cade said. "I do not question it because I do not need to."

"There is your answer, Peter," Horton said. "That should satisfy you. Cade is our guest, and I will not have him interrogated by you or anyone else while he's here with us."

"You would have him do your bidding, Father," Peter retorted. "Yet you will not allow him to know his true nature."

"There's no need for such talk." Horton stooped to retrieve the wristwatch from the floor. He stared at its face for a moment, as if he were seeing the face of his son-in-law behind the dull plastic. Then he held it out to Cade. "Please. Go back. Keep Harry from making his terrible mistakes. Find him, and stop him. Irena need never know. As far as she's concerned, he's gone forever anyway. Ten years is a long time. She's learned to live without him." He shook the watch. "Please. Protect us from him."

Cade focused his gaze on the wristwatch extended toward him.

*It is not real. It cannot be.*

"He could force you," Peter murmured. "He has it in his power—over all of us."

"Do you really think I can't hear you? I'm standing right here!" Horton cursed, shaking his head and squeezing his forehead in frustration. "You know what? Fine. You're right, Peter. Maybe I should just exercise my executive powers and

force our dear Mr. Cade to do exactly what I want. You like the sound of that? Really crush his personal space—as well as his self-image, mind you—and see where that gets us. Excellent idea: keep harassing the sword-wielding monk!" He scowled. "For crying out loud. What's wrong with you?"

His scorn landed on deaf ears.

"If you do not agree willingly, he will make you do it. He can. He has done it before." Peter nodded, meeting the astounded gaze of his creator as he spoke to Cade. "You cannot fight him. He is our father."

*He is not mine.* Cade clenched his fist.

"Peter," Horton said with obvious resignation.

"Yes, Father?"

"Shut up."

Peter did not utter another word.

Horton turned his gaze to Cade. He said something, but Cade did not understand the words. More of his peculiar verbiage, perhaps? Or was it a command of some sort?

"Now Cade, I'm going to slip this watch on your wrist and show you how it works. It's fairly simple, when you come right down to it. I'm sure you'll have no trouble picking it up. Not like you have much of a choice, right? Good, I'm glad we understand each other."

He stepped into Cade's personal space and fastened the black plastic watch. Cade found himself unable to resist.

"You know, Peter can be hot-headed at times, but in the end he's often right. Maybe I should have told you from the start, I don't know. You've had your directive, and I guess I thought that was enough. Keep Irena safe, aid her in the futile quest to find her long-lost husband, hack to pieces anybody stupid enough to give her any trouble." He frowned as he adjusted the settings on the watch, scrolling through the options on the digital display.

Cade tried to speak. But instead of hearing his voice, his thoughts remained imprisoned.

*What is happening? What has he done to me?*

"But... Yeah. See this here? You can set it for any date in the past. There's a ten second delay, then the *backtracking* kicks in. You'll end up right here, on this exact spot, this *where*, but it'll be the date you set it for. That *when*. Get it? Same time zone, different time."

"Yes," Cade's voice answered. But his mind rebelled at the sound of it.

*No. I will not be a part of this insanity. Irena! We must leave this place!*

"I've set it for the date Harry received the prototype device from the *Peddler*. His older self, that is, but never mind. It gets too confusing. Spoiler alert!" He laughed, then cleared his throat. "You'll need to go to the NewCity Central Train Station and meet him there. If he doesn't hand it over to you... Well, then you'll just have to kill him and take it. Understood?"

"Yes," Cade's voice answered again.

*Never—I cannot kill her husband!*

Horton chuckled. "Great." He clapped Cade on the shoulder. "Now, you won't be able to take your sword with you. We don't want you accidentally skewering yourself en route. Wormhole turbulence and whatnot. So you'll have to find a suitable weapon for yourself when you arrive there—*then*," he corrected himself.

Cade's *kodachi* fell from his hand with a clatter.

"Father, she's getting up," Mary warned him.

"Irena?" Horton turned toward her.

"Where am I?" came his daughter's voice, groggy and confused, from the back room.

"Take care of her, Paul." Horton tossed Paul a tranq gun and he caught it mid-stride, nodding once.

Cade strained violently against the stone his body had become.

"We can't have her interrupting this momentous occasion, can we? No, that wouldn't be good at all. She can never know, never, never," Horton lowered his voice. "It

would kill her. Because she has a heart. You and I, on the other hand?" Horton slapped Cade on the back. "Like father like son!"

*No. This cannot be.* Cade trembled within rigid walls of flesh.

"That's right, lad. You're my fourth masterpiece—but more like the runt of the litter, unfortunately. You came out of the incubation chamber all hairless and white, a dark-eyed albino. Kind of creepy, really. So I had to make up for your faults with your training, your *skills*, as it were. The whole Way-following monk act was a perfect finishing touch." He chuckled but soon was shaking his head and frowning. "Oh, I know you're real upset in there, and I'm sorry boy, I really am. I guess I should've told you sooner, like the others. They've always known what they are."

Mary stepped beside him, staring at Cade in wonder, reaching out to touch his cheek and bald dome with her soft fingertips.

Horton smiled at the display of affection. "Looks like your sister might have a little crush on you!"

"But...I'm *not* his sister really, am I, Father?" She faced him, her fingers lingering at the base of Cade's neck, visible above the fold of his robe.

Horton winked at her in a fatherly way. "No, not really, my dear. No blood relation."

"So we can have sex?"

Horton restrained himself from laughing. "I suppose so, but you'll need to talk that over with Cade when he returns."

"He is going, then." She looked disappointed. She returned her longing gaze to Cade. Her fingertips drifted up to his chin.

"The sooner the better," Paul interjected, tossing the tranq gun onto the table with a thud. "Irena won't be able to take much more of this juice before she blacks out for good."

"It will no longer be necessary, once our Cade returns from a successful mission." Horton tapped the screen of the

wristwatch and stepped away, gesturing for Paul and Mary to give him a wide berth. "Bon voyage lad, and remember: We're counting on you. The fate of the world is in your hands." Then as an afterthought, "Oh yeah, and don't take off the watch for any reason, or you'll be stuck back *then*. Got it?"

Cade's voice answered: "Yes."

*What have you done to me? I will NOT kill him!*

"What do you think is going on inside that bald head?" Paul asked with a wry grin.

Horton shrugged. "Who knows?"

They watched as Cade vanished in a blast of electric-blue light. Mary released a short cry of alarm; Paul, a whoop. Peter muttered something that sounded like *Good riddance*. Cyrus Horton stared into the empty space where Cade had stood as if expecting him to reappear at any moment.

It would be a while. Cade had his new directive: Intercept the delivery of the BackTracker device to Harold Muldoon. Kill Harold Muldoon if interception proved to be impossible. Return to the present. Somehow, these orders had been planted in Cade's mind, and he was powerless to override them.

*What am I? Man? Machine?*

He was neither. He was a synthetic being.

*How is this possible?*

Questions consumed him, even as his body acted on instinct, striding with purpose along the perimeter of the subway tunnel. It had changed. No longer the dark bowels of the Underground where bloodthirsty freaks lurked amid long-forgotten rails. Here, now—twenty years in the past—the NewCity subway system was up and running. As if to solidify this new reality in his mind, a train whipped past with a mighty roar and flashing lights. Cade's body did not

flinch, deep in this cold, subterranean world of concrete and steel. It knew where he was going.

He started to run. A white ghost, sprinting along one kilometer after the next, following a long stretch of tunnel to its source: NewCity Central. Another train passed him by, then another, threatening to suck him under its belly with the sheer force of its speed.

*Who am I?*

All he needed was a weapon. Perhaps there would be a Eurasian gift shop in the hub station. Lethal weapons always made the most-striking gifts, and tourists seemed to love that sort of thing. He hoped the blade itself would be worthy.

*Scripture—I must remember the holy scriptures. "I will fear no evil, for You are with me..."*

The tunnels passed in a blur. Minutes later, Cade stood in the bustling plaza of the central train station. It was the height of the early evening rush, commuters pouring out of the trains one after another, walking coats and hats and briefcases and purses with only one destination in mind: home. Synthetics and humans alike, returning to NewCity from their day jobs in the outlying Provinces. They took no notice of the white monk. They were accustomed to seeing such holy men lying in wait to beg off hard-earned credits for the sake of the less fortunate. They passed him, some jogging, all brushing past, a few more forceful than others. He found it difficult not to be swept up in their tide.

In two hours' time, this plaza would be vacant. The ticket kiosks would power down to standby mode. Most of the trains would sit on their rails, asleep for all intents and purposes. The hidden eyes and ears of the security feeds would watch and listen as shopkeepers closed up for the night and activated their electric fences. The only trains left to run would do so on the hour, and the only forms of life in the grand station would be a pair of security guards on the third floor, kicking back for their dogwatch with a pot of bad coffee and a box full of greasy donuts.

Cade found himself gazing up the long flight of steps that led to the third tier. Bustling bodies surged around him, a rock in the middle of a rushing stream.

*I can fight this.*

He turned his attention to a gift shop six meters away. Perhaps he would find a suitable blade there. His body navigated its way through the passing commuters, slipping through them like a silk sheet without making contact.

One patron stood inside, talking to the synthetic behind the counter without really looking at her. The quiet noise level was a stunning contrast to the storm outside.

"Hobby...or something else?" the SYN asked with a stunning smile, her eyes flashing with delight at the broad-shouldered patron.

He nodded. "I'm a collector."

Cade stepped behind him, aware of his presence but not focused, his eyes scanning the walls of gleaming Eurasian memorabilia for his weapon of choice.

"They fascinate me—these swords and daggers from ages past," the man mused aloud.

*I know that voice.*

The realization came hard and fast, but Cade did not react. He instantly recalled the man in the alley outside The Pit. The owner, Gavin Lennox. Only this was many years earlier. Twenty years ago.

"It was a very personal way to end one's enemy," Lennox said.

The synthetic girl released a tinkling little laugh. "I suppose so. No Plague in those days."

"They had their plagues," the man's retort came sharply. Then his tone softened. "We always have, I'm afraid. Powerful people tend to seek absolute power."

"That may be so," the SYN conceded. Then she was back on-topic: "A gift, perhaps?" She swept her hand in a gesture that offered everything behind the counter,

mounted with obsessive symmetry along the wall. "Wrapped to go?"

"You read my mind." He exhaled, weary from the trials of the day. "I'm meeting with a few of my investors this evening. Perhaps a double-edged gift would help them see things my way."

She arched her brow in a well-designed expression of sympathy. "Are they giving you trouble?"

*She does not care. She only wants to make her last big sale of the night.* Cade surprised himself. He was actually listening to their conversation. But the thought that came next was the real shocker: *I am no different from her. It. We are not human.*

His eyes found what he was looking for, even as he gave no conscious thought to the hunt. A gleaming *kodachi* sat mounted on the wall, a meter to the SYN's left.

Lennox chuckled. "I'm sure they'll come around—or I'll cave in. One or the other."

"A traditional dagger would be an excellent gesture on your part. I'm sure it would garner their support, whatever the cause." She beamed at him, waiting expectantly.

He nodded, thinking it over. "Perhaps."

Cade tuned them out, turning away as the man left the shop without a weapon of any kind, neither for his collection nor for his finicky investors. Cade kept his face hidden. For the first time since he had been sent back in time, his thoughts and actions were working in conjunction: somehow both his mind and body knew that he should not meet Gavin Lennox this evening, not like this. Even so, he risked a quick glance up at the man who would become the renowned owner of the city's greatest den of debauchery.

This was not the same Lennox. There was no unkempt hair, no trench coat or chain tunic or jackboots. This man wore a simple suit, carried a briefcase, stood at ease, yet with a strong, athletic posture, his solid jaw clean-shaven, his black hair slick beneath a smoke-colored fedora. This was



not the same man at all. He stepped outside and joined the mass exodus without a backward glance.

*Twenty years changed him.*

Cade could not believe that he was truly standing there in the shop, breathing air from another time. The past? How was it possible?

Without realizing it, as if his body were again acting of its own accord, he threw the synthetic girl senseless to the floor and took the blade from the wall. Tucking it into the sleeve of his white robe, he exited the shop. He swiped the SYN's keycard to bring down the electric fence behind him. The shop was closing early tonight, and no one seemed to notice.

His eyes rotated up toward the surveillance center on the third floor—his next stop, once these multitudes cleared out of the plaza, and the shopkeepers and support staff left for the night. He would do what he had been sent to do.

*I will NOT kill Harold Muldoon.*

"There is little you can do to stop me," he breathed, slipping his hands into the generous sleeves of his robe, across his middle. Silently he navigated his course through the ebbing tide to the stairs and the security guards he would find soon enough.

## EIGHT

*Not again.*

People were vanishing right and left. Just as they had before, so long ago, when the BackTracker and his crusade through time was in its heyday. Collateral damage. Souls who never saw the light of day, thanks to his meddling in matters that were none of his business.

No, that wasn't right. It *was* his business. Muldoon had made it his business.

Everything was connected. How could he not have realized? Maybe he had. It was an acceptable risk, for the good of the many. Go back, save a life. Return—and find out your next-door neighbor had never been born. Because of what you did *then*. Now would never be the same.

*No more.*

He rose from the couch littered with laundry, squeezed his temples, fought the thoughts that raged against each other behind the confines of his skull. This room, silent now, was haunted by the lingering presence of a boy who had never lived.

Or if he had, he was no longer here, sharing this temporal strand of reality. Someone had altered the past, and now the kid was gone. Forever.

*The father?* He had to be responsible. Somehow. But he too had vanished into the air.

Another BackTracker? *There was only one device in that package, the one with a dog-eared copy of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.*

A lifetime ago. Yet he remembered it clearly, as he did with so many images and sounds from pasts that were his and were not, those which had happened and those which

never would exist. He alone remembered them all, as he alone had unraveled the temporal string and sent its strands into a myriad of directions. Now he was doomed to travel along a single strand of time where most of his memories no longer held any meaning.

The wristwatch. The rare book. The crumpled package from Cyrus Horton—that old man in the hallway. But it couldn't have been him. It didn't make any sense. That was the boy's father in this reality. Not Muldoon's father-in-law. They had never known one another.

The letters circled in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* had told him everything he needed to know about the device—the BackTracker. A black plastic watch that ripped a hole through the fabric of time and allowed the person wearing it to travel into the past, to *backtrack* one's temporal string. And in so doing, to disrupt the passage of time from that moment onward, diverting the flow of time's river into a direction it never would have surged otherwise.

He dropped his hands, clenched his fists. He cleared his head the only way he knew how: by breaking his train of thought, forcing himself to focus on the here and now. Only this moment. All he ever had, really.

He turned back to the couch. The boy had never been there. That's what the memories told him. When someone vanished, it was because the past had been altered, causing them to cease to exist. The memories told him there was nothing he could do. They told him to forget about the kid, to go to bed. It was late. There would be another day to survive tomorrow, and he'd need his rest if he was going to make it through in one piece. Without the darkness shattering his tentative grip on reality.

Defying the memories that barraged him, he stretched out his hand to touch the cushions where the boy had lain. The faux-leather compressed beneath the pressure of his palm. Still warm.

Had he really been there? A flurry of unrelated memories threatened to confuse his certainty. They argued with his senses, even as he touched the pillow where the boy's head had been. Damp, cool. Yet the laundry lay exactly as it had before Muldoon brought the boy in from the rain, cold, wet, and unconscious.

*He was here.*

Muldoon grit his teeth, willed the memories into silence. He would deal with them later, see how relevant they were. For now, he looked across the room. His gaze rested on the vidscreen at the door.

The files would show the boy leaving the apartment—if he'd ever been there. You couldn't argue with that kind of evidence. Unless it had been doctored.

Uncertainty again...

He remembered two faces: dark skin, smiling with large, white teeth. Monks of the Way. *What would they want with a kid?* It was crazy even to think it, but this one memory overshadowed all the others as he strode toward the door and tapped his retrieval code into the illuminated pads below the screen. He didn't use his voiceprint, didn't want to break the silence. He didn't stop to wonder why.

He scanned the white digits on the greyscale image of the hallway outside. Scrolled them backward to five minutes ago, seven. Saw himself re-enter the apartment to find it empty. Ten minutes ago, twelve, twenty-one—

His jaw muscle twitched. His gaze narrowed as he slowed the playback. There, carried limply over the shoulder of the first monk, he saw the boy. The kid's facial muscles were slack, his disheveled hair clinging to his forehead in damp strands. The second monk followed, turned for a moment to be certain the door slid shut behind him. In so doing, his face came into view, eyes glancing upward. A direct look—one that belied no fear of being seen, no anxiety at being caught in the act.

*There you are, you son-of-a-bitch.*

The dissonant chorus of memories fell silent. The BackTracker had nothing to do with this. It was a clear-cut case of child abduction. Nothing more. In a way, that came as a relief.

*Let's find out who you are, holy man.*

He focused on the monk's face, frozen on the small screen, as he activated the plug behind his ear with a single tap. Instantly, his vision fogged up with the Link interface entry portal. He entered his log-in and preliminary pass-images, which he set to shuffle randomly among the hundreds he'd stored to keep prying eyes off his trail. Once he was in, he ran the image captured by his ocular implant through a dozen citizen search programs, increasing the odds of finding a correct match.

Scenic images slid past the periphery of his vision, verifying his ident and user privileges, keeping him on the citizen search engine as SCANNING... SEARCHING... scrolled across in tandem.

Then, after a few seconds: MATCH FOUND: YENG ZHU. The face had a name.

*And who's your faithful accomplice, Mr. Zhu?*

He skimmed over the monk's profile and found that Kuan Ti was the name of his partner in crime. Both men were currently in NewCity—*Imagine that*—at the invitation of none other than Mayor Joseph Reeves. Both monks hailed from some Eastern Province where the governors' best efforts at rebuilding the post-Plague infrastructure had failed miserably despite every good intention on the part of those involved. No doubt they were here to glean some wisdom from the brainchildren of The Pearl and SYNCorp: Gavin Lennox and Ashland Solomon, respectively.

*In between swiping kids for perverse extra-curriculars.*

His stomach turned over at the thought of it. A frenetic urgency surged through him, despite every inclination to let things be. This situation didn't concern him. He was invisible. Had been for years now. But the kid had been

stolen right out from under his own roof, and that didn't sit right with him. Not at all.

UPDATE scrolled across his vision. The two unholy kidnappers were currently at The Pearl, being wined and dined by the mayor himself.

The Pearl. Home away from home for every low-life in high places. Owned and managed by the lowest of them all, Gavin Lennox. A man who always got what he wanted and who wouldn't think twice about cutting through anyone foolish enough to stand in his way. He'd done a lot for NewCity, but then again, he'd earned a lot of credit in the process. Handling the mob with one hand and the politicians with the other took a rare talent. Lennox was a gifted manipulator of humans and synthetics alike. A real people-person, as long as the people served his purpose. When they didn't...

*They find themselves torn apart.*

Maybe not like the boy's father, out in that dark alley, but one way or another, Lennox had a reputation for sticking it to anyone who didn't play the game by his rules.

*First the father. Now the kid.*

How long ago had it been? Less than an hour? He'd found the boy in the pouring rain, eager enough to take his chances against the traffic and go running into the street, straight for the remains of his father lying at the mandroids' feet. The tuxedo with an umbrella had asked the old man a few questions, then turned away, leaving the giants to do his dirty work. Had that been Lennox?

Muldoon tapped his plug and blinked as his view of the apartment's entryway returned. He stared back into the living room, toward the empty couch. Absently, his hand went to the revolver holstered under his left arm.

*How long has it been?* The last time he'd set foot into The Pearl—

He shook his head, squeezing his temples. *I don't know which memories are real.*

Not a day went by that he didn't feel like he was losing his mind, haunted by sights and sounds from the past that he knew were as real as anything else. He'd experienced them himself. He remembered them clearly. But the sad truth? They were related to events that had never occurred.

He knew he'd been married at one point. He remembered every detail of their wedding day with crystal clarity—the reception, where he'd slow-danced his bride to some old jazz number, his heart and soul overcome with love that exploded like a nuclear bomb inside him, all the while wondering: *What have I ever done to deserve this amazing woman?* He remembered her face like no other, his beautiful angel in white gliding across the dance floor.

He remembered their life together, struggling to make ends meet, living in this crappy HellTown apartment while they both worked—him as a private investigator, her as a therapist—and saved up what they could to get out of here, to move over to Easy Street where he'd give her the life she deserved. *One big case...blow it wide open.* That's all he'd ever needed.

But in the end, it hadn't mattered. Because none of it had happened. He'd never been married to Irena Horton.

She'd never been born.

He cursed. Stormed into the kitchen and grabbed his coat, tugged it on. Smashed his hat as he retrieved it from the counter, picked at it a little, re-shaped it in the hallway outside as his apartment door slid shut and locked itself behind him. His eyes remained on the hat in his hands as he descended the eight flights of indoor stairs, and only when he'd stepped out into the rain did he put it on and pull the brim down to shield his eyes.

The slick, vacant sidewalk and empty street beyond beckoned. It was there his feet took him, shoes and socks with no chance to dry since their last encounter with the relentless downpour.

*Forget about the kid. He's nobody to you. Who is, these days? You've done enough good—and more than enough harm. Leave this alone. It's got nothing to do with you.*

One block of dark tenements passed, followed by another. Diffused moonlight illuminated the way in a frosty glow between storm clouds and sheets of driving rain. Shadows threatened to overtake any passersby, reaching out with grasping fingers to touch a warmth they would never know for themselves. The man's eyes roved as he walked. Habit. He couldn't help it. He knew this area of town too well to let any of it pass unheeded.

In another life, he might have been born here. He would have lived with his father, just the two of them against the world and all its odds. But they would have made it, because they always looked out for each other. He knew his dad needed him. They were inseparable. That's why he'd thrown all caution to the wind when he saw his old man torn apart in that alley across the street—

He slipped, stumbled, but caught himself with one hand against the pole of a streetlight that had long since quit its only purpose in life.

*I'm losing my mind.*

But it made sense—in a completely illogical way. If he couldn't trust his memories from what seemed to be years ago, how could he trust any from less than an hour ago? If, in fact, that was how long it had been since he'd restrained that kid from charging into the street.

Time didn't work the way it used to for him. It had always seemed relative, depending on his activity at the moment: minutes raced along while he was doing something enjoyable, but the opposite had also been true. Now, however, there was no telling how time would pass. He often had no idea what hour it was. Sure, he could Link up and check the standard, but it never seemed right. Deep down, somewhere inside him, he knew it was wrong.



That copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* hadn't come with any disclaimer. If it had, it might have read something like WARNING: PROLONGED USAGE OF THIS TIME TRAVEL DEVICE MAY RESULT IN A VARIETY OF SIDE EFFECTS INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, CHRONIC JET LAG, SCHIZOPHRENIA, INSOMNIA, AND (of course) CONSTIPATION.

He almost smiled, in spite of himself. But then he looked at the streetlight, and he had no idea how long he'd been standing there, bracing himself against it.

A chill slithered down his spine, brought on by the downpour now blasting against him. The wind had picked up over the past moments...minutes...whatever. He watched his shoes as they picked up the pace and left the useless streetlight behind.

Dark, quiet blocks devoid of any other foot traffic soon gave way to splashing, honking cars with lights that sped in both directions at the cross street up ahead. Broadway. There, the umbrellas on the sidewalks bustled to and fro with a life all their own, shapes that resembled men and women coming and going at an almost frantic rate.

*Nothing's changed.*

Everything was exactly as he'd left it, like no time had passed at all. As he entered the barrage of fast-paced bodies, allowing their momentum to carry him forward, he found the faces attached to them were the same he'd seen before—most of them, anyway. Synthetics.

*Don't they ever sleep?*

Doubtful. One of the many human flaws genetically weeded out of these human-replacements. What better way to beef up the economy than to create consumers who had no need for sleep and could instead spend the entire credit balance they'd earned in a single day on all that The Pearl had to offer? A genius marriage of mutual benefit for Lennox and Solomon. Each created supply and demand for the other: SYNCorp took care of the workforce, the consumers, while The Pearl offered employment for some and a place for

the rest to spend their hard-earned credit on one-of-a-kind entertainment. Together, they were helping NewCity climb out of the post-Plague depression and limp onward into a bright future. It was all about making the town look alive, making it easier to forget about the decimated population.

But all cynicism aside, SYNCorp and The Pearl had done a lot of good for NewCity.

*Despite all those deals struck in the dark.*

Lennox had Mayor Reeves in his pocket; everybody knew that. The mayor would never stand up to him—not now, not ever. Joseph Reeves had become nothing more than a figurehead, and his police didn't do much more than keep the peace. Most of them were rumored to be on a payroll subsidized by Lennox himself.

The governors had originally contracted SYNCorp to replace only fifty percent of the human workforce destroyed by the Plague, but all you had to do nowadays was walk into any place of employment and find it run almost entirely by synthetics. So much for the provincial mandate. And so, cynically speaking, it was easy to look around town and say that NewCity was run by a gangster and a corporate mogul sharing the same bed, both with the same megalomaniac tendencies.

*But who's looking?*

He was. Up at the white lights that curled in a fancy, long-forgotten script, larger than life letters spelling *The Pearl*. A dark awning stretched from the massive front doors out to the sidewalk beyond, every centimeter of space underneath taken by the hundred or so potential patrons waiting to get in. They talked among themselves, umbrellas down at their sides, collapsed and dripping. They weren't going anywhere, yet they waited patiently as if standing in line were the ultimate destination in and of itself.

*Another decidedly un-human trait.*

He turned away, sloshed through the downpour toward the alley and the side door he knew would be unlocked. No

SYN would think of getting inside that way. It wasn't in their nature to break away from the mainstream. No other humans were out tonight by the looks of things. Not that they were much for thinking outside the box either, these days. Zombies, most of them. Addicted to their virtual lives on the Link and less than adept at functioning in the real world.

The blank face of that neglected little girl flashed through his mind, and he flinched. Another symptom of his psychosis: mental images showing up without warning, startling him with their appearance. Not a glitch with his ocular implants. He'd already had them checked. Twice.

He exhaled, forcing himself to focus on the moment. The downpour around him, torrential and white in the sparse light from a single lamp high above the alley. Rain pelting the slick pavement and exploding in black puddles collecting in every depression of the brickwork beneath him. Streams rushing past him on both sides, carrying scraps of trash out toward the street, to the gutters where automobiles splashed to the curb to release passengers with their umbrellas.

He looked for the old man's remains, his blood, any evidence of what had happened less than an hour ago. Nothing. The mandroids had cleaned up what they could. The rain had done the rest. It was as if the kid's father had never been there.

The unmarked steel door opened easily, and Muldoon stepped inside the club, leaving the door to shut behind him. It did so with a bang, and he cringed, glancing along the dark hallway inside for any sign of life. He removed his hat, shook it once toward the floor, aware of the raucous music up ahead. What The Pearl was known for: *BigBand*, they called it. Music from a couple centuries ago. Alien to him, but so *alive*.

He took a step toward it, then another, pulling his arms free from the drenched coat that had gained some poundage

during his recent stroll. He passed a door marked PRIVATE with a sensor grate beside it. Interesting location—first floor, near an unlocked side door. He filed this away, as was his habit. Nothing ever went unnoticed.

"May I help you?"

He turned sharply to find a pretty girl, twenty-something with bright eyes, standing behind him. Where she'd come from, he had no idea.

*So much for nothing going unnoticed.*

"Yeah, I'm-uh..." He wasn't off to a great start.

"Let me take that for you." She smiled and reached toward him with an ivory doll's hands. Before he knew it, she had his water-logged coat draped over her arm with his hat on top. "Looks like you might be a little turned around. The coat counter is this way. Follow me, if you please." She laughed softly, tinkling like little bells. "Wet out there, isn't it?"

"Raining cats and dogs," he muttered. He would be agreeable as long as he had to be.

She stopped, half-turned. "What does that mean?" She sounded like she'd never heard the expression before.

He could have answered with a quip, a random answer that might have appeased her curiosity. But the truth was, "I have no idea."

She laughed again and resumed her gliding gait toward the end of the hallway and what lay beyond: glitz and glamour in the form of tuxedos and silver dresses moving to and fro with purpose. He glanced down at his own attire. He was going to stand out like a sore bum.

"It's funny how many sayings there are, and they often don't even mean what they say," she tossed back over her shoulder. "For instance, here's one I heard just a few hours ago from one of our patrons: *I can read your face like a book*. I mean really, what's that supposed to mean? What's a *book*?"

He almost smiled. He wanted to ask, "When were you hatched?" But that wouldn't be mannerly. SYNs had feelings, too—at least that's what he'd been told.

Of course she wouldn't know what a book was any more than a dog or a cat. Such things no longer existed, and she'd only been programmed with the knowledge she needed to carry out her duties at The Pearl. The forgotten past didn't matter, as long as she could take care of the coats that came flooding in every night.

"I'm new here, so I've got a lot to learn, that's for sure. But I really don't understand some of these sayings, and I don't think I ever will." She shrugged insouciantly as she came to the counter and set down his coat and hat. She reached over the side and returned with a ticket in her palm. "For your coat, whenever you want it back." She smiled, and in her eyes was an innocence he found disturbing.

"Thanks."

"I'm Sally, by the way." The ticket remained in her hand. He hesitated, then pinched it from her palm. "Muldoon."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Muldoon." She giggled and took his coat behind the counter, back to the racks where others like it, only newer and not so wet, already hung in rows.

He watched her go until she was out of sight. Then he took a quick breath and started down the steps into the heart of The Pearl, where the music was louder and the lights were brighter. *The belly of the beast.*

It had been years. Of that much he was certain. Or as certain as he could be of anything, considering his current state of mind. Yet nothing had changed. The lively action on the dance floor, inspired in no small part by the tireless efforts of the musicians on the stage above, led to the overall atmosphere of cheerful irresponsibility and dared anyone to resist its infection. The synthetic waiters constantly moved about, always with platters full, weaving in and out of the way, never spilling a drop, never coming

close, always with a broad smile in place to welcome everyone they passed.

Muldoon looked up the regally carpeted stairs at his right, allowed his gaze to follow them upward until they reached the third tier: the VIP section. That's where the mayor and his visiting unholy guests would be. Doubtful they were holding the boy up there. But the kid had to be somewhere nearby, in some dark corner of The Pearl.

There was only one way to find out which one.

He waited for two of the waiters to pass, followed by a tuxedo with a glamour-girl on each arm, headed straight for the dancing throng below. The band's tempo had changed, shifting up a notch, and the energy in the place stepped up to the challenge, drawing many a pair from their tables on all sides to join in the fervor below.

Muldoon ventured up the stairs against the traffic, one hand in the pocket of his trousers, an attempt to look at ease in a world now as foreign to him as any Eurasian Province. The eyes facing his way didn't seem to notice him. They were enraptured by their destination, and little else mattered. He was glad of that. The last thing he wanted to do was explain what he was doing there.

*Even if I could.*

But as the masses thinned out and he approached the third tier, he found his mind racing for a plausible explanation, one that would satisfy the formidable presence standing next to the white sign carrying the same fancy script he'd seen outside: *VIP SECTION*. Unlike other eyes which had seemed to see straight through him, the eyes of the three-meter-tall sentinel glowed down at him as if he were the only one present.

"Name?" the mandroid droned.

Muldoon paused one step below, his hand resting casually on the polished silver banister. His gaze roved across the limited view his vantage point afforded him. "Harry Muldoon. Mayor Reeves is expecting me."

The automaton reached forward with a scanner in its large hand. Muldoon drew back the cuff of his jacket to bare his wrist.

"Ident confirmed," the machine droned as the scanner lit up, verifying Muldoon's subdermal tag. "However, you are not expected. I must ask you to leave. The first and second tiers are open to the public. You may enjoy all that The Pearl has to offer in one of those sections."

"There must be some mistake." He strained his neck as he looked around. "I just got a call from the mayor. He said it was urgent, that I should meet him right away. Something about his wife and her boyfriend."

"Unverified." The glowing eyes stared without expression. "You are not expected."

"I understand that. There's no way any of this could have been *expected*." He turned his gaze up to the soulless face of the giant robot. "But here I am. And I don't think the mayor would take it kindly if he heard you were trying to kick me out."

The mandroid paused, processing this unanticipated turn of events in the sophisticated computer behind its humanoid mask.

"I will ask the mayor. Wait here," it droned, pivoting away and striding toward a table at the far end of the level with an enviable view of the stage.

Muldoon didn't feel like waiting.

He followed a few paces behind, hidden for the most part by the massive frame of the mechanical bouncer in front of him. The tables they passed on either side must have been deserted recently, as martini glasses and appetizers by the score sat unfinished. The few patrons who remained in their seats were of the oldest generation, humans by the looks of them, and with selective hearing that could choose to ignore the dance floor when it beckoned. Particularly when a fresh round of drinks was being served by an ever-so-polite synthetic waiter. A few

elderly eyes gave Muldoon a perfunctory glance that evolved into a curious gawk as they noticed his failure to dress for the occasion. *Doesn't he know he's at The Pearl? For crying out loud!*

"Mayor Reeves, please forgive this intrusion," the mandroid began as it came to a halt, its tone neither apologetic nor affable. "But there is a man who says he is here to see you. His name is not on the list."

"Where is he?" came the mayor's jovial response.

"Right here." Muldoon stepped out from behind the automaton with an attempt at a friendly salute.

The robot turned, its sizable arm swinging outward, slamming into Muldoon's chest and sending him sprawling backward against a table, knocking it over, skidding across the carpet into another table, knocking it over as well, as chairs flipped in every direction. Shocked gasps echoed from the vicinity of the elderly patrons, and the mayor uttered a cry of dismay. To Muldoon, unable to catch his breath, let alone make a sound, it felt as though his lungs had collapsed beneath two sets of broken ribs. He hoped it wasn't as bad as all that. Wincing, he did his best to regain his footing with all the grace he could muster.

"Why the hell did you do that?" Reeves scolded the mandroid.

"He is not expected," came the immediate reply. "His name is not on the list."

"I don't care about that. Look at him! He's a human citizen of my city, and I'll not have him thrown about like so much garbage!"

"He is an undesirable." The machine turned and strode purposefully toward Muldoon. "I will take him out to the alleyway."

"You'll do no such thing!" The mayor cursed, heaving himself out of his seat with some effort. "Where's Lennox when I need him?" he muttered, clamping his hand onto the



mandroid's solid forearm. "Cease and desist! You will not harm this man."

*He's alone.* Muldoon took in the scene before him. The mayor had been sitting by himself at his preferred table. The two monks were nowhere in sight. Had the Link been wrong? *Are they even here?*

"I said STOP!" Reeves bellowed as the mandroid proceeded, undeterred by his hold on its arm. While likely no one on the tiers below could hear the mayor's outcry above the jazzy fortissimo, there was no excuse for this mechanical bouncer's bad hearing. It was obviously ignoring Reeves. "I gave you a direct order!"

"I do not work for you."

Taken aback by this brash statement, Reeves did his best to recover, dragged along by the grip he refused to relinquish on the machine's arm.

"Well, your boss works for me, so that means you do. Got it?" He grit his teeth, dug his heels into the thick carpet. "Cease! Desist!"

"His name is not on the list."

Muldoon watched the machine approach. He slipped his hand into his jacket and curled his fingers around the grip of his revolver. A few rounds should be enough to freeze up the automaton's central processors. *And draw plenty of attention.* Pulse rounds often had a way of monkeying around with every power source in a confined space like this.

"What's your name?" the mayor shouted at him. Hanging onto the mandroid, Reeves looked like a kid whose rotten big brother was about to kill his favorite pet.

"Harry Muldoon."

"Yes of course. Muldoon..." Recognition flashed through the mayor's eyes at the name, as if he'd heard it once before. A long time ago. He grunted, gripping onto the machine with both hands. "That's right. This is my friend, Harry Muldoon. He may not be on the list, but he is welcome to join me. I've been...expecting him."

The mandroid stood within a meter of Muldoon. It swiveled its head to stare down at the mayor. "Because of the situation with your wife's boyfriend?"

"Huh? Oh, right. That." Reeves tentatively released its arm. "He's with me. We're going to have a drink, talk some things over." He struggled to catch his breath. "You can go back to your post. Go on. Everything's fine here."

The glowing eyes returned to Muldoon. "His name is not on the list," it droned, resolute.

"My mistake. Won't happen again, I promise." The mayor chuckled, patting the machine's arm. "Just an oversight, I'm afraid."

Without another word, the mandroid turned and stalked off, back to the VIP sign at the top of the stairs.

"Might want to get somebody over here to clean this up," Muldoon called after it. He gestured at the toppled tables and chairs.

The mayor sucked in his breath as the machine halted and rotated its head to look back. But that was all. It fixed Muldoon with a direct stare for only a moment before turning away to resume its retreat.

"I see that your predilection for trouble hasn't waned over the years." The mayor tugged a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed at his glistening brow as he returned to his seat. "Now what's this about my wife?"

"Fiction. Had to tell that golem something." Muldoon followed, hand to his ribs. "So you remember me."

"By reputation only, I'm afraid. You were held in fairly high esteem by Daniel Armstrong, from what I recall."

"A good cop."

"That he was."

"Always managed to tolerate me. Before he left town." Muldoon gestured at the empty seat across from Reeves. One of three. "May I?"

The mayor nodded. "Armstrong may have disappeared, but I'm sure a detective like yourself would have no trouble

locating him." He downed what remained in his wine glass in a single gulp and directed his gaze toward the band below.

"Last I heard, he was living it up on some little-known island in Southeast Eurasia."

"You don't say?" The mayor's tangled eyebrows hoisted themselves upward. "How'd he manage to pull that off? Was I paying him too much?"

"I have my theories." Probably paid off by some local gangster. Lennox, maybe?

"I thought they hated us over there."

"With enough credit, buying friends is easy."

The mayor chuckled dryly, his gaze dropping toward the empty glass in his hand. "So what brings you to The Pearl tonight, Mr. Muldoon? Any particular reason why you risked life and limb to see me?"

Muldoon nodded, glancing over his shoulder. The mandroid stood rooted at the top of the stairs.

"Thanks for getting that robot off my back."

"Don't mention it."

"But I'm not here to see you."

The mayor looked surprised, then intrigued. "Oh?" He set down the glass and met Muldoon's direct look.

"You've got a couple monks in town visiting, isn't that right?"

Reeves nodded. "Yes, from one of the Eastern Provinces—I can barely pronounce it on a good day." He chuckled.

"We have conferences scheduled throughout the week. They want to learn from us, find out our secrets to success and what-not. It seems that NewCity has become the governors' proof in the pudding, so to speak, for what is to come. It won't be long before Ashland Solomon takes SYNCorp nationwide. But I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he caught himself. "I suppose I've been sitting alone too long."

"So they're not here yet. The monks."

"No, but they're on their way. Of course, they also want to make Gavin's acquaintance. It seems The Pearl has

become as renowned as SYNCorp across the Provinces. It's all about the road to recovery these days, isn't it? The *Revival*." He traced the rim of his wine glass with a thick, hairy finger, becoming lost in the effort. "You're here to see them, is that it?"

"Already have," Muldoon admitted. "In passing." He watched the mayor as he said, "They came by my apartment earlier this evening."

"You don't say? Why—if you don't mind my asking?"

"Making the rounds, I guess. Saving lost sheep."

"A little late in the day for proselytizing."

Muldoon nodded. "When are they supposed to arrive?"

The mayor shrugged. He glanced toward the stairs.

"They should be here already. I don't know what's keeping them."

*Too busy kidnapping, maybe?*

"I've got a favor to ask." Muldoon moved to rise.

The mayor's frown deepened. "Yes?"

"Don't tell them I'm here." He turned his gaze to the far corner where a vacant table sat in shadows.

"Are you back in business, Mr. Muldoon?" Reeves chuckled, but it sounded shallow, maybe a little uneasy. "On a new case, is that it?"

Muldoon almost smiled. *Those were the days.*

"Thanks again." He tucked in his chair and stepped away, righting the furniture he'd been hurled against only minutes ago. He left everything he touched as it had been prior to his arrival.

Mayor Joseph Reeves watched Muldoon go until the shadows in the corner nearly swallowed him whole. Muldoon took a seat at an empty table with his back facing the mayor. And there he sat, this unusual individual from the past, a man whose name alone would have been enough to grant him an escort to any section of any nightclub, VIP or otherwise, at one point in time. But that had been years ago.

Before Armstrong's disappearance, before his own retirement. Back when he was the best private eye in NewCity.

"May I freshen your drink, sir?"

Startled from his reverie, the mayor looked up at the broad smile of the SYN standing before him. One of the handsome young waiters who all looked the same. Alike in almost every way. "Yes, thank you," he replied absently.

"Are you expecting company, Mr. Reeves?"

"Three more, yes. They should arrive soon."

The waiter exchanged his empty glass. "Would you like me to leave drinks for them also?"

Reeves attempted a smile and shrugged his bulky shoulders. "I don't know what they're having."

*Or why this retired detective would be interested in them.*

The waiter bowed, smile intact, and left with, "If there's anything else you require, don't hesitate to call me over. My name is George." He strode away, past vacant tables to the far corner where Muldoon sat alone in the shadows.

"Would you like to order anything, sir?"

Muldoon glanced up at the SYN. "No, thanks."

"Very well, sir. If there's anything else you require, don't hesitate to call me over. My name is George." He strode away at the same pace he'd arrived, at the same pace as every other waiter in The Pearl. Unhurried yet purposeful.

Muldoon watched him go, and in so doing saw the waiter pass two men in long white robes on their way up the stairs. Their hands were tucked into drooping sleeves across their midsections, and slight smiles were plastered across their faces. The mandroid sentinel allowed them to pass without a word, and they glided across the carpet as if their bare feet made no contact, straight for the mayor's table.

Reeves stood and greeted them with the usual politician's pleasantries, and in this case, attempts at

Eastern bows of respect. He welcomed them to his table, glad they'd found the place, and it was fantastic to see them. Would they like anything to drink? Were they hungry? They smiled, shook their heads politely, no. They apologized for being late—delayed, they explained, unaccustomed to the magnitude of foot traffic on NewCity sidewalks.

*Where's the kid?*

Muldoon clenched his jaw, restrained himself from getting up and crashing their little party, demanding to know where they'd stashed the kid's body after their perverted fun.

*Out in the alley? A popular spot tonight.*

He waited. He listened. Now and then he glanced at them over his shoulder. The monks asked Reeves if they would have the honor of meeting Gavin Lennox at some point tonight, and a synthetic named Sally arrived to inform the mayor that Lennox was on his way. He too had been delayed.

*Busy tearing somebody else's father apart?*

Eventually, the owner of The Pearl arrived on the scene, and Muldoon found himself sinking lower into his seat. The shadows concealed him for the most part, and Lennox's attention would be divided among the mayor and two monks. But there was always a chance of being discovered. And that was the last thing Muldoon wanted—for now.

A lengthy discussion ensued involving trivial matters such as the meaning of life and the definition of a human soul. Muldoon wished more than once that he'd taken up the waiter on his offer. Any drink would have been welcome.

But he sat tight. He waited. And his waiting paid off.

Lennox excused himself, and one of the monks followed: Kuan Ti. The mayor was left at the table with the other one, Yeng Zhu. George arrived on the scene, depositing a second bottle of wine, which he proceeded to uncork and pour into the mayor's glass, much to the delight of its recipient.

"Ah yes, thank you, thank you," Reeves babbled, flushed in the face. He'd had more than a few drinks since his encounter with the mandroid. "None for you, Mr. Zhu?" he turned to his companion, but instead of listening for a response, he wheezed hysterically at his own little rhyme. "None for *you*, Mr. *Zhu*!"

The monk smiled. "No, thank you."

"If there's anything else you require, don't hesitate to call me over." George strode away.

Muldoon got up and approached the mayor. "Enjoying your evening, I trust?"

Recognition sparked in the monk's black eyes. His lips parted with thinly veiled surprise, but he said nothing.

"Mr. Muldoon!" Reeves grinned, eyes glassy, groping for one of the untouched goblets on the table. "Here's a man who'll share a drink with his mayor!"

Muldoon held the monk's gaze. "We meet again."

"Yes." He nodded once. "So it would appear."

"Mr. Muldoon, I'd like to introduce you to the holiest Way-Follower I know: Mr. Yeng Zhu!" Reeves chuckled, raising his glass in a toast.

The monk didn't bow at the waist. Neither did Muldoon. The mayor's joviality subsided as he noticed the silent standoff between them, interrupted only by the effervescent music wafting upward from the stage below.

"What did you do with him?" Muldoon gripped the back of an empty chair. In his mind, he'd already swung it into the unholy man's face and broken every bone.

Yeng didn't blink. "He is safe."

Muldoon fought the sense of relief that threatened to relax his frame. "Where?"

A flash of white broke Yeng's face, large teeth glistening. "If you were to know, Mr. Muldoon, then he would no longer be *safe*."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Yes, would someone please explain whatever is going on here?" The mayor frowned and set down his glass with some spillage. "I'm totally lost!"

Yeng ignored Reeves' prattle. "The boy was never meant to meet you. That is the truth of it."

"Tell me where he is." Muldoon wouldn't make a scene, as much as he wanted to—not with that mandroid standing on duty a stone's throw away. This the holy man knew full well. He sat at ease, the depth of his eyes holding a knowledge Muldoon had not even begun to fathom.

"I cannot."

*If he's still alive, they would have kept him nearby.*

Muldoon reached into his jacket and gripped the revolver. He slipped it out of its holster, just enough to get the monk's attention—and the mayor's, inadvertently. "Get up."

"Mr. Muldoon!" Reeves gasped, eyes and mouth gaping.

"Not you, Mr. Mayor. You can stay put. Mr. Zhu and I are going to stretch our legs a bit." He stared the unholy man down. "Now."

"Do you believe this to be the most prudent course of action?" Yeng floated to his feet, hands still hidden in his sleeves. His expression was one of genuine curiosity.

"Mr. Muldoon seems to be looking for trouble tonight," Reeves murmured, pouring himself another glass of wine.

Muldoon stepped back, allowing the monk to leave the table and stand in front of him. "Lead the way, Mr. Zhu."

Yeng paused, one of his eyebrows arching upward. "Can you squeeze water from a stone?"

"We'll see." Muldoon nudged him forward.

The monk stepped lightly across the plush carpet and glided toward the stairs. Muldoon followed on his heel, ignoring the interest returned upon him by the elderly patrons they passed. *What's this fellow up to now?*

"I am not sure that he would even recognize you." The cadence of the monk's voice sounded as though he were



reciting poetry to himself. "But I know she would. You are as dangerous as she said."

Muldoon found his attention divided as they approached the mandroid. *What's he talking about?* He felt the automaton's glowing eyes turn and focus on him.

"If she were still here, of course," Yeng added.

*Irena? No, it isn't possible. He would have no way of knowing.* She was never born. Not now, not the way things were. Muldoon cursed himself. *Not since I screwed everything up.*

Yeng halted and turned to face him. Above the dark dome of his head loomed the mandroid, staring with interest. Muldoon looked from one to the other. His grip on the concealed revolver weakened and slipped away, leaving the weapon in its holster. He felt as if he were suddenly in a dream, that none of this was real... Like so many of his memories.

"Yes, Mr. Muldoon. Your *wife*." The monk smiled with what could have been mistaken for compassion. "It was she who first brought the boy to us."

## NINE

Irena caught her breath as if she'd forgotten to breathe, her eyes wide. She lay on an unfamiliar bed—a dingy mattress on a concrete floor. She jolted upward, struggled to get to her feet, but the dark room swam, illuminated by only a narrow beam of light beneath the closed door. Zigzagging now.

She fell back onto the mattress, her senses flailing vertiginously. Her head felt much heavier than she remembered.

*This isn't right. Where am I?*

Running—that she remembered. Down old subway steps, into pitch-black tunnels. She'd bought a pair of goggles off a ghost of a man. *Where are they now? Did someone take them from her? How did I get here?*

She looked around, able to see well enough to tell she was alone. So was the mattress. There was nothing else in this concrete box of a room. She remembered Armstrong and the Blackshirts showing up at the apartment. She remembered leaving Cade behind. *What has become of him? Did he make it?* If he had, then why wasn't he here with her?

He would have found her, regardless of the obstacles in his path. Nothing would have stopped him.

The door creaked as it swung inward half a meter. A deluge of white light washed over her. She squinted her eyes, raising a hand to shield them.

"Cade?"

"You're awake now, dear?" came a lilting female voice.

Under her hand's shadow, Irena made out the tall, slender silhouette of a woman leaning against the thick

steel doorframe.

"Where am I?" She tried to rise, but the room swam again. Better to stay put for now.

The silhouette took a step inside. "Careful there, sweetheart. You don't want to overdo it. You've been out most of the day. Take things slow now, won't you?"

"Where am I?" Irena repeated with less urgency, dropping her hand from the light to cradle her throbbing forehead.

"You'd be Underground, darling. A long way from home, I'm sure. But you're safe. Don't be worrying about a thing. Your father—"

"Don't tell me," Irena groaned. "He's here."

"Of course he is."

"Of course he is." She cursed, shaking her head. *I should have known.* "What did he do to me? Why do I feel like I've been drugged?"

"Because you were. For your own—" The woman stopped herself, probably noting the expression on Irena's face. "We had to tranq you, my dear. Otherwise, you would have attracted the attention of the freaks out in those tunnels and brought them all down upon us. It was for your own good, really. And ours!"

Irena shook her head, squeezing her temples, wishing there was some way to speed up her recovery. What dosage had they given her? How long would it take to get over these debilitating aftereffects?

"Who are you?"

"My name is Mary. I work with your father."

*I'm sure you do.*

"We're continuing his research," Mary said with a grandiose air. "Down here, away from the Feds with their rules and regulations. They didn't appreciate the genius that is Cyrus Horton. They were content to use his work as long as it benefited them: the weapons, the artificial intelligence, even the Link interface itself. But as soon as he started

delving into areas of true universal importance, once they realized none of his research or development would be earning them any credits in the near future—"

"You do realize I'm his daughter," Irena interrupted. "I've heard all of this before."

"So you have. I'm sorry, I should have realized. But sometimes I get to talking, and there's little that can be done to shut me up!" She laughed, sounding like a soprano practicing her scales.

"Where is he?"

"Your father?" Mary's laughter subsided. "He's out with Peter and Paul, but they'll be back soon. Bringing us some vittles, and it's sure to be delicious. Always is!"

Irena watched her and wished the light was better. She didn't seem quite human, this one. Too cheerful, considering the circumstances.

"You're a SYN."

Mary seemed taken aback for a moment. "Yes, I am. What gave it away?"

As a rule, Irena was never this direct. But she wasn't currently at her best. Woozy from the tranquilizer they'd given her, more than infuriated at having been taken against her will and imprisoned in a dark cell with the most annoying jailor imaginable. The situation reeked of her father's influence, and every muscle in her body tensed against the thought of meeting him again, face to face.

"He made you, didn't he? My father?"

The silhouette nodded. "That he did," she said with a sense of awe. "Using the source code from Alpha Geminorum as a template. Which he improved upon, of course. I mean, they originally intended synthetic beings to be used in *combat*. Can you imagine? But out of the darkness that is Underground, there breaketh forth light—the creative genius of the inimitable Cyrus Horton!"

Irena felt her stomach swim. *I'm going to be sick.*

"So in a way, my dear... We're sisters, you and I," Mary said. "We have the same father, after all."

*I have to get out of here.* Irena braced herself against the mattress and willed herself to her feet. There she stood, swaying but holding her own, despite the hands Mary extended her way.

"I'm fine." Irena rejected her help.

"Oh, you're a stubborn one, you are. So much like Father!"

"Don't call him that." *He doesn't deserve it.* Unless he treated this creature better than his own family, abandoning them when Irena was only fourteen. *Has he been down here all this time?* Had the authorities even searched for him Underground? Had there been any Blackshirts with the courage and fortitude to do so?

"The...*hurt* he caused you is still fresh—"

"I need goggles. And I need you to show me the way out of here." Irena took a step forward, her legs wobbly at the knees.

"You sure that would be the best idea right now? To go running off down here?"

"I'll risk it." She stumbled forward, past Mary and into the fulgent white of the room beyond. She could barely keep her eyes open in the glare. Squinting, she saw the long table in the center of the room and the sprawling wake of scraps, electronic parts, pieces of steel and wire left behind by a crazed inventor. Her father. A man she hadn't seen in more years than she cared to count.

Because she didn't care. He'd ceased to be relevant in her life a long time ago.

"I don't think Cade would approve, now would he?"

Irena turned sharply, scowling at the tall woman. "How do you know that name?"

Mary smiled, dazzling in her beauty—perfect teeth and rosy lips. "I truly doubt he would relish the thought of you running about without your guardian angel."

"Is he here?" Irena staggered back to where Mary leaned against the doorframe. "Do you know where he is?"

"*When* would be more like it." She folded her arms, freckled and ivory in her sleeveless black blouse. "He's backtracking right now."

Irena could only stare.

"Should return in a bit. Why don't you just sit tight until he does, and then you and he and Father can catch up. I'm sure Father would love that. His little family, together again!"

"Backtracking..." Irena heard the word as it escaped her lips, but it came from far away. *So it's true.* "There are others. He made others."

Mary raised both of her tapered eyebrows and leaned forward for clarification.

"My father—" The word still tasted strange after living so long without it. "He made other BackTracker devices? After the prototype?"

Mary's laughter was light and infectious. "Of course! What genius would end his life's race at the starting line? He's made a few now, improving them every step of the way —"

"And he's used them."

"Many times. He's got to make sure they work, now hasn't he?"

*He's been careless. Somehow, at some point during his travels into the past, he's revealed what should have remained secret.*

That's why there was a site on the Link devoted to BackTracker speculation. That was how Gavin Lennox had come to know about the device and the man behind it—the BackTracker—who could, according to Link speculation, solve even the most unsolvable cases. With a time-travel device, that would be easy.

*Is my father that man? Is he the BackTracker?*

"That's all he left behind." Mary gestured toward the concrete floor where Cade's short sword lay. Irena had never seen him without it. He would not have discarded it willingly. "We've got bets laid, Peter and I, as to whether he'll return in exactly the same spot. When he gets back from his little errand in the past, that is."

"Why did he go?" Irena felt the strength returning to her legs. She stood with more confidence, less at the mercy of this smiling synthetic. "How did your father make him do it?"

Mary shrugged at that, as if the answer were staring Irena in the face. "He can make any of us do anything, if he wishes it. He's our creator. Cade may not have known it to be true, but I'm certain he does now."

*Cade is no SYN.* He was a dedicated follower of the Way, and as far as she knew, one of the only prerequisites for such devotion was to have a soul.

"Show me." She turned to the debris-strewn table.

"You want to see what Father's been working on?" Mary bubbled, nearly skipping to her side.

The jumble before them was a labyrinth of unfamiliar components—whether pieces to a larger puzzle or simply discarded junk, Irena couldn't be sure. She recognized mounds of random electronic parts and wires, glowing nuclear cells, and the insides of what appeared to be outdated computer systems, pillaged beyond recognition. Somewhere in there was one of the BackTrackers. Her father had never been much for organization, and it would be like him to leave his most groundbreaking invention sitting in plain sight.

If only she knew what it looked like.

"This one is a real trip—literally!" Mary reached into the clutter with deft familiarity and retrieved what looked like a silver cigarette lighter. "Father calls it the *Translator*. Always one for catchy titles, he is. It takes you from this reality, where we're standing right now, into an alternate reality at

the same moment in time. An identical world, only not so identical as you might—"

"Show me the BackTracker."

Mary looked at her with a flash of uncertainty in her eyes. Then the twinkle returned with another smile. "Of course, my dear. Don't tell me you've never seen it!"

*Never.*

Mary set the lighter down and reached into the inventor's clutter. As she did, Irena felt a tremor in her being, an intense awareness of the moment, that somehow events were culminating here, now, in such a way that would forever alter the course of her future. There was no going back from this. Not even if she wanted to.

The SYN's white hand held what looked like a child's plastic timepiece, only adult-sized. A wristwatch. Something no one in a Linked world would have any need for.

Steel clanged against steel, jarring Irena. Mary dropped the watch onto the table and faced the bolted door at the end of the room.

"That would be the boys," she sang, skipping away. She checked the vidscreen mounted beside the door's solid frame. "And they've brought home quite a feast, by the looks of it!"

Irena reached for the wristwatch and pocketed it, glancing at the back of Mary's head across the room. She didn't think about it, didn't dwell on the fact that she had no idea how the device worked—or if it worked at all. Something inside her said she would need it, that the next phase of her journey required it. Somehow, it was going to bring her one step closer to finding the man she loved.

"Is that my girl?"

The voice tore through her like the blade of a rusty knife. Memories long-sealed broke forth within her, swirling with mixed emotions, both lovely and hateful. She looked at Cyrus Horton, a complete stranger as he strode in from the darkness with a crate of wrapped food items in his arms. The



grizzled hair and stooped shoulders seemed out of place; they didn't match the image she'd kept in her mind all these years, despite her best efforts to be rid of him for good.

Her father was an old man now. Strong, energetic by the look of his gait, but only his eyes were the same as she remembered: older than time, younger than a child's, grinning with the madness of true genius.

"Wide awake now?" He dropped the crate onto one of the other tables, crushing the components beneath it that might have been useful at one point in time. He fixed her with a warm smile and held out his arms, as if he expected her to run to him and embrace him after all their years apart.

Irena stood rooted. "What have you done with Cade?"

"Straight to business? Not even a hug for dear old dad?"

"Tell me what you've done."

His arms drifted downward, as did the creases on his face. Behind him, Mary directed two other men—a large one with dark skin and one much older and more decrepit than her father—with their crates, showing where to set them down. They kept their eyes to themselves for the most part, but they glanced at Cyrus Horton and his daughter. Mary bolted the door shut behind them.

"It's been a while," Horton said. "You look...good. A lot like your mother when she was your age. How old are you now? Twenty? Thirty? A grown woman, that's what you are. I'll be damned if I haven't lost track of time." He kept his distance.

So did Irena. The hum of machinery around the perimeter of the room held the moment. Pinpoints of light on the equipment danced rhythmically. Dead monitor screens stared at the scene before them, reflecting what they saw.

Horton attempted another smile. "It's so *good* to see you, Irena." He took a step toward her.

"Answer me." She tried not to cringe away from him. He parted his lips to speak, but said nothing.

"Shall I start putting things together?" Mary asked her creator.

He whirled to face her. "Yes! Thank you, Mary. I'm sure we're all famished—Irena, most of all. You'll find a fairly appetizing spread in there," he gestured toward the crates. Then he grinned, facing Irena once again. "You've gotta love those Wayists. Always willing to lend a helping hand to the less fortunate!"

"Too bad they don't know you're one of the richest men in the city," she retorted, unable to restrain herself.

"At one time, perhaps," he allowed. "But that was many years ago. How long has it been, Irena? Ten, fifteen?"

"Try twenty."

"That long? Really? Wow... Guess I've been kinda busy down here."

"With your SYNs and your time machines."

Horton's eyebrows lifted. Then his gaze narrowed, and he turned toward Mary. "How much did you tell her?" he asked with a playful sparkle in his eyes.

Mary giggled and kept her head down, eyes focused on the wrapped items she removed from the crates. "Just enough to pique her curiosity, Father."

"Is that so?" He returned his attention to Irena. "Pretty neat, huh?" He jerked a thumb toward the others in the room. "I *made* them!"

"So that's why you left us? To play God?" Irena regretted the words as soon as they flew from her lips. Their past was irrelevant. The only thing that mattered right now was finding Cade and getting out—

"I know I hurt you, Irena. Both you and your mother." His eyes glistened. "But you've got to understand... They were shutting me down! I had to continue my work—"

"I don't care. Really. Whatever you've done with your life—great. It's your life. But I want you to listen to me very carefully." She lowered her voice and clenched her fists down at her sides. Her strength was returning, brought on by

the fury raging within her—but she had to remain in control. She couldn't appear weak, not now. She couldn't allow the words inside her to exit in a torrent of accusatory screams and tears. "Tell me what you've done with Cade, or I'm going to smash every one of your toys to bits in this stink hole of a secret lab."

"Dinner is served!" Mary chirped brightly.

The other two men converged on the table where Mary had set out their sandwiches and salads, and Horton turned to join them. Irena fought to keep her head clear, even as hunger needled her insides.

"Did you hear me?" she raised her voice. The man who'd once been her father stared at her. "I'll do it. I'll break everything!"

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so." He paused. "You won't. Because if you do, then there won't ever be a way for you to find him."

"Cade."

He chuckled. "Well, him too, I guess. But I was speaking of your husband, Irena. He's trapped back there—back *then*, if you catch my meaning. He fiddled with the thread of time, and the spool's run out for him. He's done more than enough damage, unintentionally, but that's beside the point. Ignorance is no excuse!" he roared, laughing. Then he composed himself, noting the fierce look on his daughter's face. "So anyhow, I sent Cade back to kill him. Figured it would be for the best."

*This can't be happening. I'm still asleep, drugged, lying in that back room. I can't be hearing this. It's insane. He's insane.*

Horton's eyebrows rose. "I know it must come as a shock, and I'm sorry for that—but here's the bright side: once Cade's through with his mission, it'll be as if you never even *knew* Harry. The two of you won't ever have met! So all these past years of anguish, not knowing what the hell happened to him—all of it will simply cease to exist. Because

he'll never have lived long enough to meet you in the first place, let alone propose to you." He shrugged with a grin. "None of us will remember him. Pretty cool, huh?"

"You're out of your mind," Irena gasped, falling against the table beside her, legs suddenly unable to support her weight. The room swam before her eyes, and she bit her lip hard to keep alert, in the moment. "You can't be serious about any of this—"

"Oh, I am. Serious as a heart attack." The grin had disappeared. He took another step toward her, hands outstretched. "Trust me, it's the only way. I know. I've thought through every other possibility, and this is the best option. It has the least amount of collateral damage." He paused, watching her. "One man dies before it's too late, and order is restored to the universe—at least in our little corner. Our *reality*. It's all we can hope for, after all the disruptions he's caused in the timeline. More like a *timeweb*, these days! We'll be back to square one, the way things were meant to be."

Irena swallowed. She blinked back the tears stinging her eyes and took a quick breath. "You've known all along. You've known how to find Harry."

He shrugged again. "Does it matter?"

She cursed him.

"Hey now—I only provided the means, not the motive. It's not my fault he decided to step out of your life, Irena. I take full responsibility for doing the same thing a long time ago, but not for him. This is between you and your husband, for crying out loud!"

She tightened her fists until her fingernails cut into the palms of her hands. She would not scream at him. There would be no tears.

"Where—?" She caught herself. "*When* is he?"

He thought that over for a moment. "Well, it's a little complicated. You mean Harry, right?"

She nodded. *None of this makes any sense!*

"Right. Well, he went back quite a few years, back to before he knew you, before the two of you ever even laid eyes on each other. Back when he was a P.I. doing some work on the side—of the illegal variety, I might add—to make ends meet. Back then, around the same time the Feds wanted to shut me down, a couple of my prototypes had surfaced amongst the masses, and there was a virtual auction going on the Link as folks vied to get their grubby hands on the BackTracker device..."

*He's insane.* Irena found it difficult to focus on what he was saying. *Did Harry get the device? How?*

"So yeah, he went back *then* to give the prototype to himself—I know it sounds really weird, but that's the way things stand at present. He called himself the *Peddler*, and he contacted his younger self to set up a meeting of some sort for the device to exchange hands."

"Why?"

"Why'd he do it? Beats me! I mean, he said something about keeping the gangsters from running our town—sounded like he thought he was a knight in shining armor or some such. A freakin' hero!" He laughed out loud. "But all you've got to do is look around and see it didn't do any good. Whatever he managed to change in the past, it hasn't kept the drug-addled ghouls from running rampant topside or the flesh-eating freaks from ruling and reigning Underground. You ever wonder where they came from? The freaks down here? Not this world, I'll tell you that much. And don't even get me started on the corruption going on with Reeves' Blackshirts and their iron fists." He cursed, shaking his head. "It's hell on earth!"

*He's so sure it's all Harry's fault. Sure enough to send Cade back to murder him?*

"How do you know things aren't the way they are because of *you*?" she said. Then she pointed at Mary, who remained oblivious, chewing a mouthful of her dinner. "She said you've made trips into the past—"

"Yes, of course, but I never changed anything. That's the difference, you see? I've gone back to observe only, never to interfere. That's where it gets dangerous."

"Are you the BackTracker?"

He looked taken aback for a moment. Then he grinned sheepishly. "The guy they talk about on the Link, you mean? That urban legend?" He chuckled. "Nope. He's someone else entirely. Or was, I should say."

"But you know who he is."

He nodded. "That I do. And I shouldn't say any more. Could make things a little messy."

Irena nodded. *They already are.* She pulled the plastic watch from her pocket and snapped it onto her wrist. "Send me back."

Horton frowned, but then he looked intrigued. "Who would you look for, Irena: Harry or Cade? Cade's a SYN, sweetheart, one of my own. You won't be able to convince him to disobey my orders. He does only what I tell him to do." He paused. "Like protecting you for these past years, however long it's been. His only directive. But now he's got himself a new one."

"Please." She stepped toward him and held out her wrist. "Let me see Harry one last time—before it won't matter anymore. You said I wouldn't even remember him, once he's..." She couldn't bring herself to say it.

*Once Cade kills him.*

His frown deepened. "I don't know about this..."

"What if I could convince him not to take the device from—from the Peddler?" she asked with sudden inspiration. "Can you send me back *then*?"

He bit his lip, shaking his head as he stared at the watch on her wrist. "He'll be kind of paranoid, sitting in the middle of an empty train station, thinking they're out to get him—police, Blackshirts, you name it. That's where Cade will find him."

"Let me find him first." She took another step toward her father. "Please."

He chuckled, the frown vanishing. He glanced back at his synthetic creations, all three of them eating ravenously. "Would you look at this? Hasn't seen her dad in over a decade, and already she's asking him for favors!"

They nodded, glancing up at their creator and smiling. Humoring him, it seemed.

Irena was close enough now to break his nose with a palm strike. She considered it. *Might be therapeutic.* "Just show me how to use this thing. I'll convince him—"

"He won't recognize you, Irena. You won't be anyone to him."

"Just let me try. Please?" She took one last step toward him. He could embrace her now, if he wanted to. She might even let him. "When I come back...if things are different, like you said—"

"Oh, they *will* be!"

Cyrus Horton smiled, gazing into his daughter's eyes. For a moment she remembered the New Year's Days when he'd dress all in white like Father Time and carry in an enormous bag of wrapped gifts for her and her mom, dropping it on their living room floor. He would lift her up and whirl her around in circles, laughing with such incredible joy. More than she'd ever known existed.

"All things will be made new!" His twitching fingers brushed her cheeks. With a tentative grace, he cupped her face in his rough hands.

Her abdomen tightened, cold and queasy. Lifting her wrist toward him, drawing his attention to it, she said, "Show me."

He nodded, his eyes now brimming with tears. Smiling, sniffing, he took her wrist in his hand as he changed the date on the watch's display to twenty years ago. He squeezed her hand once before releasing it. Then he backed away.

The watch beeped, counting down.

"Brace yourself." It was the last thing she heard him say.

The SYNs paused mid-bite to fix Irena with their full attention.

An icy, dizzying vertigo swept over her, wrenching at her senses as she felt herself convulse out of control. Then, just as suddenly, she stood in the same room, in the same light, but without any tables covered in electronics nearby. There were no machines or equipment around the perimeter of the room. It lay empty except for a pile of crates stacked haphazardly along the far wall, marked with NEWCITY TRANSIT in bold lettering.

Chilled, she hugged herself as goosebumps prickled across her skin. *Now what?*

By all appearances, she wasn't in the same *when* as she had been only a moment ago. And while she was tempted to stand in wonder at the moment—the enormity of the situation demanded it: *She had traveled back through time!*—there was obviously a more pressing matter. Without a backward glance, she jogged to the heavy steel door, unbolted it, spun the creaking wheel lock, and heaved it open.

A rush of wind blasted against her, and she cowered in the flood of white light sweeping up the corridor from somewhere beyond. The concrete beneath her feet rumbled with the clamor of a passing train.

These subway tunnels were alive again. There would be commuters down here instead of freaks. People would be traveling across the Provinces.

When she was fourteen, her father had taken her and her mother out of NewCity on a summer's day, out beyond the confines of the asphalt streets and skyscrapers with myriad square windows, all the way to the countryside, untended, overgrown, wild. She had seen a deer—one of the last, she was sure. It stared straight at her, curious, not afraid. It looked so alone.



The train passed. The corridor returned to darkness. She held out her left hand to trace the wall as she started out cautiously, then picked up the pace. Once she made it to the rails, she knew to turn right. That direction would take her to the NewCity Central Train Station. Ruins infested with doped-up ghouls in her own time, but now, in this *when*, it was the bustling central hub of the city's thriving mass transit system.

So much had changed. *Could it really be Harry's fault?* What could he have done?

It defied all logic to think one man's actions could do so much to undermine the future of a city and its people. Yet that was exactly what her father claimed, that somehow, single-handedly, Harold Muldoon had been the culprit of all the irreparable damage everywhere to be seen in the world Irena had left behind.

She ran, cold but energized, unable to see farther than the splashes of light cast by glow strips mounted along the rails at regular intervals, unable to plan beyond the only thought consuming her mind. That somehow, if she managed to convince the Harold Muldoon of this time not to take the BackTracker device, then Cade would never be forced to kill him.

She felt a sudden rumble beneath her feet, sensed electricity humming against the stagnant air, reverberating the tunnel's concrete walls and ceiling. Another train was coming. The darkness ahead of her, a hundred meters or more, gave way to white light forging through the black. It would only be a matter of seconds before it was upon her.

Jogging to the side, leaping over the track and mounting the concrete steps beyond, she reached a vacant platform, one that would have been lit up if anyone was waiting for the next train. Now it lay dark and silent. She ducked behind a thick support column as the train's blast of light and rush of air came and went, the rumble, the clamor becoming familiar to her once again, sights and sounds from

the subway trains of her youth. As if she were reliving old memories.

She turned to resume her dash through the dark in the train's wake, but something in its afterglow caught her attention. A door stood ajar on the other side of the platform, one marked MAINTENANCE. It looked as if someone had recently come and gone. As every remnant of the train's light vanished and darkness reclaimed its territory, she held out her hands to feel her way along. She slid the door open the rest of the way and reached blindly along the cold wall for a light switch.

She squinted in the glow of a single bulb dangling from the ceiling of the supply closet. Instead of storage crates, this one held what appeared to be large bottles of cleaning solution, mops, buckets—and two grey jumpsuits hanging from a rod with two pairs of black work boots below. Time for a change of wardrobe?

She tugged down one of the jumpsuits and stepped into the loose legs, tucked her arms into the baggy sleeves, zipped up the front to the collar. It was too big for her and the material was rough against her skin, but none of that mattered. Fewer questions would be asked if she came across any of the rail workers; and if she was lucky, they would ignore her completely. She slipped her numb toes into the smaller pair of boots and laced them up. Also too big, they would likely chafe her ankles, but that didn't matter either.

Moments later, she was back in the tunnel with the glow strips passing between her strides, jogging faster now, knowing that Cade was already ahead of her. It wouldn't take him long to obey his creator's command.

Cade...a SYN. How could that be true?

She remembered the first time she'd met him, a dark night two long weeks after Harry's disappearance. She'd gone out for the first time, out of the apartment, walking aimlessly for no other reason than to confirm that life as

she'd known it still existed for everyone else. There had been an alley and a knife-wielding ghoul too strung-out to know whether he was plugged in or not, living a virtual fantasy in the flesh. He'd attacked her, dragged her into the alley by her hair. She'd fought him, gouged out his eye, kicked his genitals to pulp. No effect. He was too far gone. He would have killed her if Cade hadn't appeared like a guardian angel in white.

He'd drawn his sword with the silent stoicism of an executioner and sliced the ghoul's arm in two. The hand gripping her hair dropped to the cold pavement, along with its forearm. The ghoul stared down at it, transfixed, not seeming to understand that it belonged to him. Blood poured thick and black under the moonlight from his amputated elbow.

"Leave us." Cade's voice had been calm as he wiped the blade of his sword clean. "Now."

The ghoul staggered away without his severed arm, mumbling to himself, and Irena thanked her rescuer profusely, intrigued by his appearance, unable to categorize him. She'd never seen a Way-following monk wield a blade with such training and skill. For that matter, she'd never seen anyone outside of the Link's virtual games carry such a weapon at all. She asked him who he was.

"I am Cade, your protector."

She'd balked at that, backing away, feeling insulted. *I can take care of myself, thank you.*

"Your husband sent me. To watch over you in his absence." He'd slipped his blade into the spacious sleeve of his robe, tucking his hands across his midsection. There he stood, staring at her like a humble servant awaiting his next assignment.

But if what her father said was true, then it had been a lie. If Cade was one of his synthetic creations, then it had been Horton, not Harry, who'd sent Cade to watch over her. Not that she needed him—she'd made it abundantly clear

from the start. That night with the ghoul was a rare occurrence. Cade merely nodded, accepting whatever she told him from that point on.

At first, he'd called her *Mrs. Muldoon*, but she insisted that he use her first name. It hadn't come to him naturally, but he adapted. And she'd adapted to his presence in her life, sitting cross-legged in a meditative pose outside the door of her apartment throughout the night, seeming to sleep with his eyes open, always alert to any disturbance, no matter how slight. Most often, just a little girl bouncing a rubber ball down the hallway from their unit.

Months passed, and she'd eventually let him in. Now, years later, he spent the nights sitting on the floor just inside her front door. He refused to sleep on the couch, which she had offered to him multiple times before giving up. He was a man set in his ways.

He spent his days aiding her in the search for her husband in any way he could. He prayed with her, having succeeded in converting her to the Way after many long nights of intense metaphysical discussions. Because of his influence, she'd finally agreed to have her plug removed, eliminating instant access to the Link and all of its virtual vices. It had taken time, but Cade became her friend.

A *SYN*? It wasn't possible. He was so *human*.

Strange sounds assaulted her ears as she became aware of changes all around her. More light, more rails, subway trains sitting idle on the tracks, either out of commission or waiting their turn to carry commuters at high velocities. She walked in their shadows. A computer-generated voice made announcements over loudspeakers above the din of what sounded like a murmuring multitude.

She had arrived: The NewCity central train station, where she would find Harry. And Cade.

"You there!" A large silhouette with a wrench in one hand stepped out from behind a stationary subway car. He

wore the same sort of jumpsuit she did. "Give me a hand here."

She blinked against the light behind him, unable to see his face. She didn't stop.

"I'm sorry." *I'm no mechanic.* Her abdominal muscles tightened. She couldn't let anything, anyone, slow her down. But she couldn't cause a scene, either. The last thing she wanted right now was to attract any attention. "I'm in a hurry—"

"Yeah? So am I! This thing ain't goin' anywhere if we don't figure out what's jamming up the works. There's a schedule to keep, don't you know it." Using the wrench to scratch the back of his clean-shaven head, the silhouette lumbered toward her. "Hey, do I know you?"

*No. And that's the way it was meant to be.* The way it would have been, had she never backtracked Cade to this moment in time.

She kept walking, past the dark figure, on to the central terminal above the tracks.

"Get your ass over here!" he called after her. "Who do you think you are?"

She broke into a jog, then a run. She didn't look back. Her borrowed jumpsuit had served its purpose and outlived it; now she needed to find something else. One of the shops in the plaza would have what she needed, something nondescript that wouldn't draw attention. She'd find a restroom and change, clean herself up a bit, avoid any other chance encounters with the inhabitants of this time.

She had to keep from altering the future even in the slightest by her presence here. *Now.*

A series of concrete steps took her from the rails up to the platform, then past the glowing, pulsating ticket kiosks to the expansive main floor of the three-tiered plaza. Moving no faster than the bodies bustling all around her, she passed the large, straight-backed benches facing the kiosks and navigated her course toward the stairs along the far wall.

They would take her to the second tier where shops and restaurants attracted commuters before and after their monotonous journeys.

She climbed, the boots biting into her ankles and rubbing at her raw flesh. She kept her eyes to herself for the most part, but she made a point of glancing down at the benches every now and then for any sign of Harry or Cade. There were too many commuters passing through right now. Impossible to spot anyone in particular.

What would Harry be wearing? Would she even recognize him? What was he like this long ago—when she herself had been merely a girl in her teens? Her heart stirred, her breath catching at the thought of seeing him again. It had been so long, too long, without him.

"Excuse me." A tall, well-built man in a tailored suit brushed past her, heading down the stairs. He seemed to be in a hurry, but not ill-tempered.

She recognized him instantly. Not Harry or Cade, as she'd hoped. Instead, it was the last person she would have expected to see again: Gavin Lennox, owner of The Pit. The same man she and Cade had met in that alleyway, where those two mandroids had suffered the full weight of her protector's blade. She raised a hand to her face, scratching idly at her brow, covering her features.

*Not that it matters, she realized. This is twenty years ago. He wouldn't recognize me.*

He looked nothing at all like the Gavin Lennox from her *when*. The owner of The Pit wore his hair unkempt, not trim and close-cut; instead of a trench coat and chain mail, this younger Lennox wore a dark tailored suit.

*So much has changed. This is another world.*

No ghouls, no subterranean freaks, no squads of Blackshirts on patrol. How did it happen? What caused such a drastic change in her world?

She glanced up as she reached the second tier. Commuters passed at random intervals dressed in coats and

hats, carrying briefcases and purses, smiling and laughing in pairs or chatting mid-stride via the plugs behind their ears. They all seemed so *happy*. Many of them were synthetics, which could explain it; but there were plenty of humans as well, and they looked just as content with their lives. Purposeful. Fulfilled.

Shopping bags with various logos adorned many of the hands she passed, bringing Irena back to the moment. One in particular caught her eye—*Femme*. She remembered the shop from her youth, when languages other than Common were spoken. French, in particular, had been a popular one, associated with romance and fashion. Behind the glass storefront, she would find something more suitable than a jumpsuit or her own attire from the future.

Rows of items hung suspended from the ceiling, all in blacks, whites, and greys, affordable for the affluent shopper who never bothered with checking price tags. She almost stopped. How was she going to pay for anything?

*If they scan my ident tag, won't I come up as being only fourteen years old? Without any credit.*

She forged onward through the masses regardless, turning with the tide and against it at unexpected intervals, until she came to the entrance of *Femme* and crossed the threshold. There were three other patrons inside, humans representing different generations, strangers to one another yet united in the same disdainful look they turned on Irena as she entered. A maintenance worker? In *Femme*?

"May I help you?" The synthetic clerk was far more hospitable, greeting Irena with a warm smile and bright eyes that held no prejudice of any kind.

"Yes." Irena snatched the first item within reach—a sleeveless black dress—and held it up in front of her jumpsuit. "How much for this one?"

"Let's check." The SYN passed her palm scanner across the length of the dress in a single swipe. "Five hundred

ninety-nine credits—on sale!" Another smile. "Shall I put it on your staff account?"

Irena was at a loss.

The clerk winked, lowering her voice as she leaned in. "We do it all the time. No big deal, really. They expect you to go to the Solstice party, but you can't very well show up in that uniform, now can you?" Her eyes danced as a giggle emanated from her perfect lips.

Irena looked down at the jumpsuit. "Right."

"And you're just going to *adore* the accessories!" The clerk disappeared behind the island counter in the middle of the shop, bending down to retrieve four items: a pair of long white gloves, a small handbag, a wide-brimmed hat with a veil, and a pair of matching pumps. She presented them with a flourish. "All included!"

Irena smiled faintly. "Charge it."

Moments later, she emerged from *Femme* with a shopping bag of her own, passing what looked like a purveyor of antique weapons—knives, swords, and the like. The electrified gate was closed, and there was no one inside. It seemed too early to close up shop, but she didn't give it another thought. Instead she directed her steps to the restroom at the far end of the promenade.

Once there, she made sure the stalls inside were empty before bolting the door and falling back against it, closing her eyes and exhaling. Her muscles melted with fatigue. She'd managed to avoid any confrontations that would alter the course of the future—as far as she could tell. So far, so good.

But the most difficult part of her journey remained. She still had to find Harry and convince him not to accept the device from the *Peddler*—his future self, according to her father. And if that didn't work, she would have to find some way to keep Cade from carrying out his mission: ending Harry's life before he ever had a chance to alter the flow of time.



*Time.*

According to her father, the train station would be empty when Harry arrived. Well, that wouldn't happen for a while. By all appearances, NewCity Central was currently at the peak of its daily efflux with commuters arriving in waves to make one or two more stops at the mall before heading home.

She would wait, change out of the jumpsuit and boots into the items more tailored for her physique. Clean up. Make herself look presentable. She was, after all, meeting her husband for the very first time—all over again. Yet never before like this.

*It's been so long...*

Her throat constricted. Tears stung her eyes, demanding to be released. She longed for his embrace, the sparkle when he caught her gaze. The ache within her was enough to swallow her whole. But she refused to give in. She inhaled a deep breath and blew it out, moving to the mirror over the sink. She set down the shopping bag and looked straight into the dark eyes reflected back at her.

Then and there, Irena Muldoon made one commitment: She was going to save her husband's life, no matter what it took. Even if she had to backtrack through time over and over again in order to do it. She would not lose the love of her life.

Never again.

## TEN

For the first time in his life, Gavin Lennox wasn't sure where he was going.

He had the boy by his side as they stepped out of the MALES room and headed up the dark hallway toward the lights and music of The Pearl's heavily populated second tier. He had the lighter in his pocket and a Way-following monk cowering in a filthy restroom at The Pit, only moments away. He had the monk's partner upstairs, seated next to none other than NewCity's venerable Mayor Reeves.

Lennox preferred not to happen upon either of them right now. Not until he'd learned all he could from this boy and given him to one of the mandroids to dispose of—as they had with the kid's uncooperative father. It seemed only fitting that father and son should both share the same fate.

Lennox was not thinking rashly. His mind was clear. He was in complete control of the situation, and he knew what needed to be done.

Nevertheless, he felt lost.

*Do I really have it in me?* The boy had to know more than he was letting on—but how to access it? *Can I torture a child?*

They rounded the corner at the end of the hall and passed stairs leading up to the third level.

"Well, mister—thanks for...you know." The boy seemed eager to take his leave, edging away from Lennox and toward the stairs leading down.

"What about the tour, Harry?" Lennox landed a strong hand on the boy's bony shoulder, holding him in place. "Don't you want to take a look around? Most kids your age would die to catch a glimpse of what you're seeing."

The boy faltered, but Lennox found his own attention drawn elsewhere. At the top of the stairs, at the entrance to the third tier's VIP section where a sentinel loomed at attention, a flash of white caught his eye, a flutter much like that of the albino monk who'd accosted him in the alley outside The Pit. It was Yeng Zhu, the other Wayist, but the monk didn't catch Lennox watching.

Yeng stood with another figure, a stranger almost hidden at this angle. They spoke in low tones, their words unclear beneath a thick blanket of music from the band onstage.

Lennox veered away from the stairs, guiding the boy across the second tier to the railing where he would hold a commanding view of the SYN musicians and their gleaming silver instruments.

"You like BigBand, Harry?"

The boy shrugged. "I don't know." He didn't seem pleased by this course correction.

"It's jazz. *Gershwing*, they call it. Very popular back in the day, a couple centuries ago." Lennox glanced over his shoulder at the stairs. Tuxedos and glittery dresses ascended and descended at random intervals, but Yeng was not among them.

*He'll want to know what's become of brother Kuan.*

"What are they doing?" The boy frowned down at the throngs on the floor weaving and bobbing in sync to the music.

Lennox chuckled. "Don't tell me you've never seen dancing before, Harry."

The boy shrugged again, both hands on the railing as he gazed below. His interest was thinly veiled by a forced air of indifference.

"Want to go down for a closer look?"

"I want to go home."

"Of course, and you will, but how about a quick look around first? Think of what you'll be able to tell all your

friends tomorrow!"

The boy didn't blink. "No thanks. I'll just go, if it's all the same."

But something about his posture made it clear he understood the situation. His father had been murdered right outside; he'd seen it happen. There was a look in his eyes that said he was going to die here too. Somehow, he knew it.

Lennox stepped beside him and leaned forward, forearms on the rail, eyes focused on the genetically engineered band playing gloriously.

"I can't let you leave, Harry. Not yet. Not until you tell me what I need to know."

"But I've told you everything—"

"No." Lennox shook his head. He didn't turn his gaze from the stage. "You haven't. You left out the part about that man who was with you...when you watched your father die." He turned then, swiveling his head to face the boy's wide eyes.

"How do you know—?"

"Those guys in white, the perverts who kidnapped you? One of them just happens to be upstairs." He let that sink in. The boy looked scared but ready to rumble, both at the same time. "He got to drinking a little too much, and I heard him spill the whole story. Seems that he and his partner were stalking you tonight. They saw what happened to your dad —" Here, Lennox knitted his brow into a sympathetic frown. "I'm sorry." He paused as the kid turned away, staring down at the band again. "They saw what happened, and he said they saw someone with you. Someone you seemed to know, like a bodyguard or something?"

"I don't know him." The words were barely audible.

"He called the man your *protector*. Do you know what he meant by that?"

"No." The kid's hands gripped the rail. "I don't know who he was."

"But there *was* someone with you when it happened."

The kid turned on him then. "What do you care? Why do you want to know any of this stuff?"

"I want to help you, Harry." Lennox held his gaze. "And I think you can help me, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about, mister."

"Gavin," Lennox gently corrected him. "Call me Gavin." He paused to manufacture a warm smile, but it wasn't noticed by the boy. "I need you to tell me more about that man with you. Anything you remember, anything at all."

"But I told you—"

"He was a stranger. That's good, it's a start. You didn't know him."

"Never seen him before," he muttered.

"Yet he knew to be there at that exact moment...when your father was killed."

The boy shifted his weight, glancing at Lennox with a haunted look to his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean those two guys who kidnapped you may have had an *accomplice*." Kids always liked intriguing words. He could see by the way the boy faced him now that he held his undivided attention. "This man, this stranger—what did he say to you?"

Harry frowned and scratched at the side of his face. "I don't really remember."

"It was a difficult moment for you, I'm sure."

"Do you think *they* had something to do with what happened to my dad?"

"It's possible." He nodded. "And that stranger who was with you is the key. Would you recognize him, if you were to see him again?"

The boy shrugged. "Maybe."

*Good to know.* He might stay alive a little while longer if he remained useful. "And there's nothing else you can remember?"

"I don't know." He frowned, staring down at the dance floor again. "I think he took me to his home. I was on a couch, like I'd been sleeping there, when those creeps in white came in. They must have knocked me out or something, because the next thing I remember is waking up back there on the floor." He jerked a thumb toward the hallway and the restrooms beyond. "If one of them's upstairs, can't we just go get him? Can't you tell your boss or Link up the cops—"

"Easy, Harry." Lennox grasped the boy's shoulder and squeezed it. "These are dangerous people we're talking about here. Murderers, kidnappers. Who knows what they're capable of? We can't endanger the lives of anyone here, let alone ourselves. We need to think this through."

The boy cursed under his breath. "We've gotta do *something*."

"We will." *I've got him on my side now.* "We've just got to be smart about it."

"I don't know why this is happening. What's it all about, anyway?" He shook his head. "Why Dad? Why me?"

Lennox weighed his words. "I don't think it's really about you, Harry." He paused, waiting for the boy's attention to swing back his way. "I think it has to do with something your father made. An invention these men want to get their hands on. They won't let anyone stand in their way."

"How do you know?"

Lennox felt his gut sink. *Have I said too much?* "That drunk monk upstairs—he said something about a device... What did he call it?" He feigned the hunt for a word just beyond his grasp. Then he pretended to remember, snapping his fingers in the air: "The *BackTracker*—that's it. Does that sound familiar to you, Harry?"

"Back-tracker?" he mused aloud. "I don't think so."

"But your father is—he was an inventor? The monk was right about that much?"

The boy seemed lost in thought. He stared at the carpet, only one of his dazed eyes visible between the locks of hair.

"No," his voice came at length, heavy and labored. "He was just my dad." His shoulders trembled then, and he sniffed, choking back tears. "I don't know why they did it to him, I don't know why. They must have gotten him confused with somebody else." He was going to cry, whether he liked it or not.

Lennox watched him with a cold disdain. *He's quickly outliving his usefulness.*

"Somebody else," the boy repeated. He looked up, eyes glistening. "There was someone else out in the alley when they killed him. Somebody in a..." He trailed off, his gaze sweeping across the tuxedo before him. "He was in a suit. Like yours."

"Do you think he works here at The Pearl?" *I can't lose him—not yet.* He knew the face of his *protector*. Lennox lowered his voice and glanced over his shoulder. "Was it one of the other waiters, you think?"

"I don't know. I didn't get a good look at him, but he was wearing a fancy suit, and he had an umbrella."

"Well, that narrows it down to just about every guy in here." He half-smiled.

The boy didn't find it humorous. He took a step back. "Could've been *you*, for all I know."

"Really, Harry?" Lennox pretended to be hurt. "After all I've done? I'm just trying to help you out here."

"Then let me go."

"And do what? Get yourself kidnapped again?" *Ironic.*

"I can take care of myself."

The boy moved to squeeze past Lennox and head for the stairs at the far end of the second tier. Lennox half-turned and blocked his path, holding up his hands in a gesture of accommodation. But he froze when he saw the figure in white descending the stairs with a man beside him.

"That's him." Lennox turned his face away, keeping his back to Yeng and the stranger. He held the boy in front of him so he would not be seen.

"Who?" Harry strained to look past Lennox.

"You can't let him see you." Lennox tightened his grip on the boy's shoulders. "It's the drunk monk I told you about. And he's got someone with him." *Your protector, perhaps?* "Take a quick look. Tell me if you recognize him."

The boy narrowed his gaze up at Lennox, then cautiously leaned to the side to peer around him. There, heading down the steps to the main floor, was the monk in white. And beside him, tall, broad-shouldered, wearing a fedora pulled low and with his hand tucked inside the breast of his jacket—

"Yeah," Harry whispered. "That's him alright."

An electricity surged through Lennox, igniting every fiber in his being, bringing into clarity his vision of the boy before him, the table behind the boy, the white cloth on the table, the crosshatch pattern of its fine silk threads.

"Stay out of sight, Harry." Breath quickened, Lennox tapped the plug behind his left ear. First, to the mandroid at the entrance, "No one is to leave the premises until you hear from me."

"Yes, Mr. Lennox," came the machine's response.

Next, to the mandroid at the top of the stairs guarding the VIP section, "The monk and the man with him who just passed you—escort them to my private quarters. I will meet you there."

"Yes, Mr. Lennox."

"What are you doing?" the boy asked, his voice tight.

Lennox glanced over his shoulder and saw the giant sentinel take the steps down two at a time in pursuit of the pair.

"Follow me." He took a moment to straighten the lapels of his tuxedo, then made his way toward the stairs at a



leisurely pace. He didn't need to look back to know the boy would tag along.

"Where are we going?"

*We* again. A good sign. *I haven't scared him off yet.*

"You're going to have to trust me, Harry. I think you'll like the way this turns out." *I'm certain I will.*

"We're going after them?"

"Yes."

"But what about the other one? There were *two* guys in white."

Kuan Ti and Yeng Zhu would both be taken care of, either here or at The Pit. As would this stranger with Yeng. Lennox would find out how much they knew about Cyrus Horton's death, what exactly they had seen. He would weigh their value, determine what they had to offer. Then they would be disposed of. The boy as well. And things would go back to the way they should have been, before this rotten excuse for a night started. None would be the wiser.

"The only men we need to concern ourselves with are right there." He pointed toward the main floor as they reached the stairs. Already, the mandroid was nearly upon the monk and his escort as they weaved through the throng of tuxedos and dresses. "That other monk won't be any trouble for us tonight."

"How do you know?"

Lennox paused to grace the boy with a smile he used to put others at ease and affirm his control of the situation.

"Trust me."

But his smile faltered when all the lights went out.

Screams of alarm filled The Pearl from top to bottom, due in part to the curtain of black that had fallen over everyone's senses, but also due to the source of it all: a poorly dressed man on the main floor firing a handgun, hitting one of the mandroids dead-center at close range with multiple pulse rounds. The robot froze in its tracks and shook violently, unable to continue its pursuit as a sizzling

electrical current splashed across its frame in jagged veins of white.

Muldoon gripped the gun in one hand and clamped down on Yeng's forearm with the other, yanking him forward into the dark. "This way."

"I cannot see a thing!" the monk protested.

"That's the idea."

Bodies thrashed against them in a wild, blind panic, but he held fast to the scrawny arm in his grip. A mass exodus surged toward the main entrance, but for some reason the doors there were closing, shutting out the light from the street beyond.

*They're locking us in.*

Good thing Muldoon knew another way out.

He tugged Yeng against the tide, shoving his way through at an angle off to the right. Toward the hallway that would take them to a wet alley outside.

"Where are we going?" Yeng stumbled.

"Shut up and keep walking."

"Do you know what you are doing? This is Gavin Lennox you are dealing with here. He will not let you escape!"

*He owns this town.* That was the subtext.

Muldoon gave the arm a vicious tug. The monk nearly cried out. "Right now I'm dealing with *you*."

Collisions with the floundering bodies decreased exponentially as they forged ahead. Eventually, they were alone. Muldoon picked up the pace, dragging the monk along the vacant hallway. The alley door had been unlocked before. *How long ago was that?* He couldn't be sure, and in that moment of uncertainty, nausea swam through his bowels with the realization he'd lost track of time, yet again.

"We are going the wrong way, if it is the boy you want —"

Muldoon cursed him. Yeng took the cue to remain silent until notified otherwise.

Behind them, farther away with every moment and meter that passed, the band had long-since quit playing, and in its place there arose a roar of dissonant voices shouting to be released from The Pearl. No doubt the mandroids had their mechanical hands full with crowd control. Muldoon hoped there would be no automations to spare, that the alley outside would be as empty as he remembered it. He gripped his gun and held it ready, just in case any of the sentinels with their glowing eyes had seen him and the monk head this way through the dark.

Reaching the alley door, Muldoon searched for a sensor plate on the wall beside it, groping with his gun hand and coming up short. He cursed, his heart thumping with adrenaline-laced anxiety.

"Perhaps it would be better if you had the use of your other hand." Yeng twisted his forearm in Muldoon's grip.

"Don't even think about calling for help."

"It had not crossed my mind. By now, Mr. Lennox must know that my brother and I are here with ulterior motives. I doubt I would be in good standing with him at present."

"I really don't care." Muldoon crouched to feel along the doorframe for any kind of release that would slide the door aside. "He can kill you, as far as I'm concerned—*after* you tell me what you've done with the kid."

"I have already explained to you, Mr. Muldoon, that I cannot. It has been my sworn duty for many years to keep him *from* you."

That again. "Because of some promise you made to my wife?"

"Correct."

Muldoon cursed, his throat constricting. "Doesn't make any difference that she's *dead*, does it?"

Even worse: that she was never born.

Muldoon's knuckles bumped against a handle along the dark frame. The door gave way with a metallic creak, sliding to the side half a meter. He shoved it the rest of the way with

his elbow and braced it open. The downpour from outside splashed in, pelting the brim of his hat as he leaned out and darted a glance in each direction.

The busy main street hummed with light and life and noise at one end of the alley. A dark side street beyond the dumpster sat in silence at the other end.

Without a word to the monk, he dragged Yeng into the rain, slipping awkwardly behind him as bare feet made contact with slick pavement. Together, they headed straight for the lights and activity bustling up ahead.

"You are certain this is the best course to take?" the monk said.

"Got a better idea?"

"If it is your intention not to be found—"

"Thought I told you to shut up."

Yeng blinked against the rain. Already it had soaked the shoulders of his robe and was continuing its course down his front and back. "Yes, you did. But when I am nervous, I cannot stop myself." He slipped again, pitching headlong.

"Stay on your damned feet." Muldoon jerked him upright.

"If I am slowing you down, please feel free to leave me behind."

Muldoon cursed.

"In fact, I insist," Yeng continued. "It would be much easier for you to disappear into that crowd ahead of us if you were alone."

*He's got a point there.*

If that mandroid out front of The Pearl were to catch sight of the monk and start making noise, it would be over. Sure, Muldoon might be able to get off a couple shots, freeze the robot in its tracks. But the SYNs waiting outside were the ones he had to worry about. Programmed with an innate sense of civic duty, they would pounce on him as soon as his gun came into view. Inside the nightclub, he'd surprised

them, and the lights-out had worked to his advantage. No such luck out here.

The plug behind Muldoon's ear vibrated. His pace slowed as he reached up to tap it. Instantly a Link-wide alert scrolled past his ocular implants:

TWO CITIZENS HAVE CAUSED A SERIOUS DISTURBANCE AT *THE PEARL* TONIGHT—A MONK OF THE WAY AND AN UNIDENTIFIED MALE—ARMED AND DANGEROUS—CONTACT THE AUTHORITIES IF SEEN—DO NOT ENGAGE

"Bad news?" Yeng said.

Muldoon tapped his plug to clear the alert, restoring his vision of the alley. They were only a couple meters from the sidewalk now. In moments, they would be surrounded by synthetics in tuxedos and glittery dresses under long coats and umbrellas. The upside: none of these creatures had the Link interface. They would have no idea that Muldoon was a wanted man.

"Not yet." He slipped his gun back into its holster.

"Follow my lead."

"I believe that is what I have been doing."

He released the monk's arm. "Walk in front of me. Don't try anything. A pulse round may not be lethal, but it's far from pleasant. I wouldn't think twice about shooting you in the back."

"A man of honor." Yeng rubbed his sore forearm.

*A monk who can't keep his mouth shut.*

With Muldoon prodding him along, they entered the stream of foot traffic that converged on The Pearl, reaching a standstill before they were more than a few paces out of the alley. Confused murmurs circulated among the umbrellas who stood in line, pelted mercilessly by the rain, waiting to take their place beneath The Pearl's awning. The massive doors were closed up tight for the night—something these regulars had never seen before.

Muldoon nudged the tuxedo ahead of him. "Hey, what's going on?"

"I'm not sure." The SYN half-turned with an amiable smile, not even noticing Muldoon's failure to dress for the occasion or his lack of a proper defensive apparatus against the rain. "I've not heard of The Pearl closing its doors before sunrise."

Muldoon nodded, turning up his soggy collar against the cold—a pointless gesture. He rubbed his hands together. "How long?"

The SYN's shoulders rose and fell. "We just arrived, but those closer to the front are saying something about a *disturbance* inside. We're waiting for more news to filter back this way." The synthetic eyes blinked, rotating to focus on the plug behind Muldoon's ear. "Has there been any news on the Link?"

"Not yet."

The SYN nodded. "I am certain the matter will be resolved quickly. Mr. Lennox has enough mandroids on hand to do the job right."

"Speak of the devil," Yeng quipped.

All too soon, Muldoon saw why. Head and shoulders above the umbrellas it shoved aside with little regard, a well-dressed sentinel came stomping through the crowd. Its eyes glowed fiercely, roving side to side in a calculated search pattern.

"Save us a spot in line, will you?" Muldoon turned from the SYN and grabbed Yeng by the back of his robe, nearly hoisting him up off his feet.

He pulled the monk out of the crowd and forged into the street. Into oncoming traffic. Headlights washed them in white as horns blared and tires screeched. So much for keeping a low profile.

"Halt right where you are," the mandroid commanded, charging forward as synthetics cleared a path.

Muldoon whipped out his gun and fired a pair of pulse rounds that flashed through the night, striking the robot's chest. The crowd cried out in dismay, cowering, umbrellas floundering. The automaton staggered a step backward and jerked to a sudden halt, limbs frozen as white bolts of energy coursed through its system.

"Get out!" Muldoon aimed his weapon at the windshield of a cab he'd impeded and strode toward the driver.

"Screw you! Get outta my way!" The driver cursed and spun the steering grips, stepping on the accelerator to veer around the two men in the middle of the street.

Muldoon lowered his gun toward the vehicle's hood. One round, and it wouldn't be going anywhere. The engine system would be fried. The driver's eyes widened as he slammed on the brakes.

"You cannot take this man's vehicle," Yeng protested. "It is his livelihood."

"Watch me." Muldoon stared down the driver. "Exit the vehicle!"

"This is not right."

Muldoon gave the monk a jerk, throwing him off-balance. "Who are you to say what's right or wrong?" he grated out through his teeth.

"We did not harm the boy in any way. We are his guardians—"

"I can't let you take my cab," the driver pleaded, shouting in order to be heard, his window wide open despite the invading rain. "It's all I've got! I'll take you anywhere you need to go, just don't shoot. Please!"

Muldoon stepped forward as the rear door of the cab opened automatically, drifting upward. He pulled Yeng along. "Get in."

"You boys in some kind of trouble, I take it?" The driver swiveled as if he were an overgrowth of his seat, his oily hair sprinkled with flecks of grey, his pudgy face thick with

stubble. Bulging eyes regarded his two new passengers with keen interest.

Muldoon slid into the backseat after Yeng and glanced outside through the oval-shaped rear window. The SYNs in front of The Pearl were slowly converging on the taxicab, watching, waiting, seeming to know what they had to do without being told. All they needed was a leader, someone to make the first move.

This came in the form of a second mandroid who exited the nightclub and joined them with deliberate steps through the downpour. Within moments, the machine was leading the pack.

"Looks like that thing's after you," the driver observed.

"What makes you say that?" Muldoon jammed the hot muzzle of his gun into the cringing cabbie's neck. "Step on it."

"Right, right." The door beside Muldoon dropped and locked into place. "Anywhere in particular?"

"HellTown."

The driver swallowed and stepped on the accelerator. The SYNs were left behind en masse, shrinking in size as the taxicab lurched forward and sped off, joining the other zigzagging traffic of its kind. Only one figure broke from the crowd and followed, racing after the cab at full-tilt, eyes glowing and focused on its prey despite the sheets of precipitation falling in between them.

"We've got company," the cabbie yelped, glancing into the rearview mirror.

Muldoon had already caught sight of the robot. His right hand tightened on the gun.

"It will notify the police of its pursuit. They will set up a roadblock within minutes, and we will be taken into custody." Yeng tilted his head to one side and smiled smugly. "Has that been your plan all along, Mr. Muldoon? To get caught?"

*I've had just about enough of you, monk.*



Without another thought, Muldoon plowed a left hook across Yeng's jaw, stunning him long enough to grab hold of his ear and slam his rain-slicked dome once, twice against the oval window. The third time was the charm, and Yeng's head broke through, shattering the plastiglass. The driver cursed in alarm, exasperated but resigned to the fact that this was not his luckiest night.

Muldoon let Yeng collapse to the floor, out cold. He'd have a blinding headache when he came to, but that wasn't Muldoon's concern.

"Halt." The mandroid's voice came loud and clear as it closed in on the cab, footfalls striking hard against the slick pavement, large arms bent at the elbows, its tuxedo and synthetic hair drenched by the rain. "The police have been notified. You have nowhere to go. Stop the vehicle at once." The ominous eyes stared straight at Muldoon through the broken rear window. "Halt."

"The police?" the cabbie moaned, cursing again and pounding the dashboard with his fist. "I need this kind of trouble like the Plague!"

"Hasn't been my night either, buddy." Muldoon brought up his gun and pulled the trigger. The pulse round hurtled out of the smashed window and—

The mandroid ducked mid-stride without slowing down.

The pulse struck the vehicle behind it with a flash of light, killing the engine instantly. The driver inside fought the steering grips as they refused to respond, brakes locking up only to slide slick tires across wet pavement, spinning the vehicle sideways. Two autos at full speed collided with it, one hitting the nose while the other smashed against the tail, screeching, bending steel and breaking glass as they spun out of control. But this awkward threesome was not the extent of the casualties.

Muldoon could only stare at the mayhem unfolding before his eyes as the mandroid doubled its pace, determined now to reach its quarry before there was a

chance for more collateral damage. Behind its rigid, racing frame, one automobile after another flipped violently up into the air, roaring like frightened beasts in the night, unable to brake in time to avoid the wreckage caused by Muldoon's single shot.

"Yikes!" The driver blinked into the rearview. "What a mess. Wow, would you look at that..." Then he cursed as the mandroid came within reach of the cab's tail fender. "Hey, that thing is—!"

"I know." Muldoon aimed his gun again, this time gripping it steady with both hands.

"Halt." The robot reached forward and grabbed hold of the fender, at the same time digging its heels into the pavement. The cab jerked forward, throwing Muldoon on top of the monk.

"It's got us!" the cabbie shrieked.

The mandroid had the tail end of the cab in both massive hands and was heaving it upward, leaving the rear tires to spin idly. The automaton's eyes glowed with menace, its giant humanoid mask framed by the broken remains of the rear window. Its heels plowed through the asphalt, leaving two jagged furrows in its wake as the taxicab slowed to a stop despite its best efforts at escape.

"Halt," the robot droned yet again.

"You sound like a broken record," Muldoon muttered and pulled the trigger, at the same time wondering, *What the hell is a broken record?*

The pulse round struck the mandroid's face and sizzled, sending a flurry of white hot sparks in all directions. The head jerked wildly, bobbling, but the mechanical hands didn't let go of the cab. Muldoon pulled the trigger again, then again. The rounds slammed into their mark full-force, blowing the mandroid's head clean off. It sailed end over end until it landed in a gutter puddle, hissing as its sparks were driven into submission.

"Yeah, that oughta do it," the driver said. "But we're still not moving." He stepped on the accelerator, revved the engine. Nothing.

The cab remained in the unyielding grasp of the decapitated mandroid, tilting forward at a forty degree angle. Traffic passed them on both sides with honking horns, but they remained at a standstill.

"How's business these days?" Muldoon said as he reloaded his weapon.

"Honestly? In the crapper." The cabbie swiveled around to face him, resigned to the bizarre situation. "There's more AI-driven taxis on the roads than ever before, putting honest guys like me outta work. We're the last of a dying breed"

"You and me both." Muldoon holstered his revolver and palmed the door release. "Got a tire iron?"

"Sure, under the backseat. Why?"

Muldoon flipped open the seat and retrieved the heavy tool from the compartment underneath. "Ease off the accelerator for now."

The driver watched his only conscious passenger step out into the driving rain, then pause for a moment to size up the situation.

Muldoon gripped the tire iron in both hands and brought it over his shoulder like he was some kind of ancient frontiersman chopping wood. Then he swung it down, breaking off the mandroid's left hand at the wrist with a crunch of metallic components and a shower of sparks extinguished by the downpour. The cab pitched to one side, and the cabbie let out a cry of alarm, hanging onto the steering grips. The mandroid's right hand on the tail fender was next to go, and Muldoon dispatched it with another heavy blow, sending it to the pavement with a wet plop.

But Muldoon's mistake was two-fold.

First, he never should have assumed the driver would stick around after all four of the cab's tires were back on the pavement where they belonged.

Muldoon's second mistake was that he didn't move fast enough.

The rear door was still open, and he could have ducked back inside in time. But as the driver floored the accelerator and nearly spun out, racing off into the night, Muldoon knew he'd never be able to catch up. So he stood there in the middle of the street like an idiot as autos whipped past him, swerving around the headless, handless statue beside him, honking at the fact that this was not where either one of them belonged.

The tire iron slipped from his grasp and fell with a heavy clunk. He watched the taxicab disappear into traffic converging in the distance, its left rear door swinging like a dangling appendage. He glanced up at the mandroid and entertained a passing thought that the two of them had a lot in common.

*Get out of the street. Go... Where?*

He couldn't go home. Yeng would give the police his name, and it would be only a matter of minutes before they came pounding on his door. Or maybe by the time he got there, they'd already be waiting.

He could go back to The Pearl and track down that other monk, Yeng's cohort: Kuan-something. Find out where they'd stashed the kid, what they'd done and why. Get himself caught that way at the scene of the crime instead.

Either way, he'd be spending some serious time behind bars. After years of keeping a low profile, flying under the radar, not getting involved. Because it was dangerous to interfere. To change things. To interrupt the flow of time. Now he'd gone and stepped in it, tried to rescue that poor kid with the all-too-familiar face he just couldn't place.

Muldoon staggered beneath the weight of the world, his insides plummeting, everything outside a blur of sickening slow motion. He left what remained of the automaton in the street and headed for the curb, the sidewalk beyond. AI-driven autos honked, swerved, splashed past him, doing

little more than contributing to his already soaked pant legs and shoes.

*Where am I? When am I?*

Blindly, hand outstretched, he somehow made it to the sidewalk and the wet brick building just beyond. He braced himself there, his heart racing. He shook his head, cursing. To anyone passing by, he was merely an undesirable without an umbrella who'd lost his way in the night, too disoriented to find his way home.

Maybe that wasn't so far from the truth.

*I know who I am.*

So began his mantra, designed to settle his nerves and tie his mind, body, soul to this moment, this timeline, this *when*. He had to focus on what he knew to be true.

He knew who he was, without a doubt.

He knew where he was. He knew when he was.

So did the man standing in the shadows behind him, the figure disguised by darkness who had appeared *ex nihilo* a moment ago through a ripple in the air. A breach between worlds. This man would have been instantly recognized by the kid, despite the uncanny mask of shadows that hid his face.

For it was the boy's father. And young Harry would have done anything to see him whole again.

But unfortunately, Harry remained in the dark at The Pearl with Gavin Lennox.

"They managed to get away, sir," reported one of the synthetic waiters with a frown of disappointment. "The mandroid who pursued them has gone off-grid. We must assume it was disabled."

"How many does that make?" Lennox snapped. "Those things aren't cheap."

"Three are now out of commission."

Lennox cursed. Young Harry looked up at him with surprise, yet with a growing understanding. This Gavin

Lennox was either the head waiter here, or he was the boss. It was clear that he was a man in charge, either way.

Lights across The Pearl flickered, then shone brightly, restoring life to every tier as they glowed on tables, in decorative alcoves, from chandeliers, and along the perimeters of hallways leading to restrooms. As one, the patrons released an audible sigh of relief, and as if on cue, the band launched into a lively number to draw them back to the dance floor. The front doors swung open, and the masses who'd been clamoring for release only moments ago now found no reason to leave. In from the cold, wet and shivering but not complaining, came patrons who'd been waiting patiently outside. In less than a minute, it was as if there had never been the slightest hint of a disturbance at The Pearl.

Even so, Harry had no reason to let his guard down. He watched Lennox, who seemed to have forgotten his existence for the time being. That wasn't a bad thing. Maybe Harry would find the right moment to slip away if he waited for it.

*But where will I go?*

He didn't want to go home to an empty apartment, not without his dad. There wasn't much there to go back to, anyway. They didn't have a whole lot.

Not that it had ever mattered. It was always just the two of them against the world and all its odds, and they looked out for each other. Harry knew his dad needed him; didn't make sense, really, but he'd felt it more than ever over the past few weeks. It was like he couldn't live without him, that his mind would unravel completely without his son there to keep him steady, keep him focused on things that mattered. Like eating and sleeping. The day-to-day stuff that kept him grounded, out of his head where he seemed to get lost sometimes.

The truth was, they needed each other. That's why Harry had thrown all caution to the wind when he saw his

old man torn apart in that alley across the street—

"Who was he, that man who kidnapped Mr. Zhu?" The waiter was speaking again.

Lennox turned his gaze to the dance floor as it reclaimed its former glory. "I'm sure it will be on the Link shortly. The police will take him into custody, and we'll make certain his ident tag is permanently barred from The Pearl." Somehow, he sounded disappointed. "That'll be all, George," he dismissed the SYN without glancing his way.

"Yes, Mr. Lennox." George strode away.

"I'm sorry he escaped, Harry," Lennox said. He hadn't forgotten about him, after all. "The police will want me to question him, once they've taken him in. And he'll talk, believe me. We'll get to the bottom of this."

Harry watched him, knowing Gavin Lennox was more than he pretended to be. "You some kind of boss-man around here?"

Lennox half-smiled as he met Harry's eye. "*A boss-man?*"

"Yeah. You know, in charge of things." The mandroids. The SYNs. They all did what he said. Just like those two monsters out in the alley when they'd ripped Cyrus Horton in two pieces. "You're the big cheese."

Lennox chuckled. "Yes, Harry. I'm surprised you haven't realized the shape of things sooner. But then again, seeing your father killed earlier tonight probably shook you up a bit. Interfered with your ability to think straight."

Rage burned in Harry's belly. Every muscle in his small frame tightened. He clenched his teeth, narrowed his gaze up at Lennox. Fought back tears as a shudder rattled his chest. "*It was you.*"

"I could pretend not to know what you're talking about, but you're too smart for that." Lennox's smile faded. "And that makes you much less entertaining." He pretended to tap the plug behind his ear. "Send up an escort for our young guest here. He'll be going to the penthouse."

"You're not taking me anywhere." Harry stepped back, shaking his head. "You *murderer!*"

"Don't cause a scene, Harry. It isn't becoming." Lennox reached into his pocket and withdrew what looked like a silver cigarette lighter. He matched the boy's backward step with one forward, maintaining the distance between them.

"Stay away from me!" Harry shouted, but there was nobody around to notice. Everyone else on this level of The Pearl was gone. They would filter back to their tables sooner or later, but not soon enough. Would they even care if anything happened to him—just some kid who didn't belong?

"Have you ever seen one of these, Harry?" Lennox held up the lighter absently.

"I'm no smoker."

"Glad to hear it. Unhealthy habit, not to mention illegal—as if that's ever stopped anyone before. But there are so many other options nowadays when choosing a suitable addiction." He flipped off the cap and the flame sprang upward, hot white, flickering hungrily in the air. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"You some kind of pyro?"

"Look, Harry."

"You're not going to keep me—"

Lennox sprang forward and clutched the boy's throat in one hand, lifting him off his feet. "*Look!*"

Harry tried to scream, but the grip against his windpipe choked it off. He struggled as Lennox held him by the neck, the flame burning in his eyes. The air in front of them seemed to move like water all of a sudden, but maybe he was hallucinating. Unable to pull in a breath. Too late to think of escape. This was it.

He was going to die here. The same man who killed his dad was now killing him.

Harry clawed until his hands fell limply to his sides, and darkness collapsed his senses.



Gavin Lennox dropped the boy to the floor and watched him lie there. Was he dead? It didn't matter, really. He'd been a means to an end, nothing more.

Lennox ran his thumb across the smooth finish of the lighter, now capped, the flame trapped. His gaze wandered down toward the stage below where the simian members of *Torment* screamed their guts out over a cacophony of grinding metal and took turns bludgeoning one of their groupies with a lead pipe. Lennox winced at the spray of blood erupting from their willing victim's mouth, head whipped aside by a vicious blow.

*Will I ever really feel comfortable here?*

This wasn't his home. He was a visitor from another world. An alien, in many respects.

Regardless, he found himself unable to pull his eyes away from the spectacle of onstage brutality. Part of him always felt like he was on safari here, observing the natives in their natural habitat. Such fascinating creatures they were, in their own demented ways.

He wished he could stay. But he had to be getting back to his own NewCity.

The police—his police—would have captured Yeng Zhu's abductor by now. The boy's *protector*. Lennox smirked as he shifted his line of sight to the motionless body at his feet.

*He'll never see you again.*

# ELEVEN

*Twenty Years Ago*

A tear skidded down Cade's ivory cheek as he watched Harold Muldoon die at his feet.

"You." Eyes bulging, darting from the blade that skewered his abdomen, Muldoon gasped and clutched Cade's hands on the hilt. "Why?"

Cade pulled a hand free, reached for Muldoon's wrist and snapped off the plastic timepiece without a word.

"Right," Muldoon rasped, chuckling shallow. "You followed me here...for it."

His office was dark and silent. The computer system and AI assistant were offline. No interruptions.

Cade tugged the short sword free in a single movement, leaving his victim to hit the floor on hands and knees, clutching at his midsection as blood poured out between curled fingers.

*This cannot be happening.*

Behind the stone wall of his face, Cade screamed guttural cries of remorse, twisting in turmoil, unable to stop his body from carrying out the atrocity occurring at his own hands. Hands that held the blade ready, prepared to strike again.

Muldoon glanced at his wound with incredulity. "Wasn't it enough...to run me through?"

"I must be certain that you are dead. Otherwise, I cannot return."

"Of course," Muldoon replied, as if it made perfect sense. "So...through the heart now...or off with my head?"

His efforts at speech came garbled as black blood wet his lips and drooled onto the carpet.

Cade watched Muldoon's bloody hand slide away from his wound, along his drenched shirt, toward the shoulder holster hidden under his jacket. Cade knew it was there without seeing it—the revolver with the pulse rounds. His own white robe was permanently singed across the chest from their earlier encounter at the train station, when Muldoon had gotten off a shot at close-range. Cade would not allow that to happen again—even as everything within him strained against his will and threatened to overcome it.

*I cannot kill this man!*

Cade's body moved without another thought. The blade of his *kodachi* struck lengthwise, slicing straight through flesh and bone, sweeping in an arc that cut the head free from Harold Muldoon's shoulders and cast it halfway across the dark room. The decapitated body slumped to the floor and convulsed before lying still.

Then everything was still.

The bloody sword fell from Cade's fingers. He dropped to his knees as tears streamed down his cheeks. "Forgive me..." His lips trembled as he prayed, gasping, forcing out not a plea but a statement of utter horror.

*The Master cannot forgive me. I am not His child.*

The wristwatch he wore chimed once. He did not know why. He turned his gaze to the timepiece in his hand that was exactly like it, the one he had taken from Harold Muldoon. Killed him for. The *BackTracker*, Cyrus Horton had called it. The reason Cade had been sent back through time. To keep Muldoon from ever using this device to alter the course of history.

*Yet that is exactly what I have done.*

Cade had changed the past by killing this man. All that he ever would have been...now obliterated. He would never meet the love of his life, Irena Horton. They would never be wed. They would never make the commitment that set them

apart as a couple to be reckoned with: to make NewCity a better place, one human being at a time. For Muldoon, it meant working as a private investigator; for her, a community therapist. The future, Cade's present-day, would never be the same without them.

His wristwatch chimed again—his *BackTracker*, given to him by his creator. He stared at the illuminated screen, the digital display, but he found himself unable to focus.

He closed his eyes to shut out the hideous scene before him. He breathed in through his nostrils, out through his mouth. His stomach churned at the coppery smell of blood. He grit his teeth to focus on his breathing and nothing else. He was all alone in a time he did not belong, in a place he deserved to spend the rest of his life. Kneeling beside the man he had slaughtered in the dark.

Time passed. He did not know how many minutes or hours. Footsteps came from the hallway outside, rapidly at first, now slow with trepidation. They stopped at the open door.

A stifled whimper, a sob restrained. Then a voice, quiet as a whisper. Suffocated by tears.

"You did it."

Cade opened his eyes to face the woman's silhouette in the doorway.

"Yes," he said.

*She sees her husband for the first time after so many years of not knowing what became of him, whether he was alive or dead. She has longed to see him again, to touch his face, to watch his eyes sparkle at her. But not like this. Not like this.*

"I am so sorry, Irena." He wept.

He wanted to tell her there was nothing he could have done, that he had tried to stop himself and couldn't, that somehow Cyrus Horton had created within him a strict obedience to a directive he could not think to ignore. But the words would have held no purpose. He was the only one

to blame, and she had every right to hold him responsible. He had killed her husband in cold blood.

*How has she come here, to this moment in time? Did she have another BackTracker device? If so— Why did she not arrive sooner and stop me? If only she had... Would she kill him now? He prayed that she would. Take up his blade and do the same to him. Please. I cannot live. Not after what I have done. Now that I know what I am.*

She stood at the door, a dark statue without a face, without eyes. He remained on the floor, unable to speak, staring at the mutilated body beside him.

"It's strange," she said, breaking the silence.

He looked up at her.

"He said I wouldn't remember him." She paused. "My *father*." The word sounded foreign on her lips. "He said I wouldn't remember Harry, once you..."

Cade nodded. "You would never have met."

Muldoon had not lived long enough. Neither had he been able to go back in time as the Peddler, to leave the BackTracker device for his younger self at the train station. *So in effect...I have killed Harold Muldoon twice. Both of them. This one as well as the one to come.* A fresh wave of remorse sent Cade's insides plummeting.

"But I remember everything," she whispered. The shape of her slender arm moved, raising a hand to her face. Her shoulders trembled. "I remember him."

When Irena returned to her own time—the same *when* she and Cade shared, twenty years from now—would her memories of Muldoon vanish? Would she no longer remember her husband in all the ways she clearly did now? Would he cease to exist in her mind, without a trace?

*She can never go back. She must not risk it.*

"I tried to talk him out of it." She fell against the doorframe, allowing it to support her. "I found him at the train station, I...talked to him. He wouldn't listen to me. So strong-willed. He's always been like that. But I never knew. I

thought it might have been my father, but...all this time, Harry was the BackTracker?" Her voice broke as a chime rang from the device on her wrist.

She didn't seem to notice the sound. But Cade focused on it and remembered what Cyrus Horton had said, that if for some reason the wristwatch were to come off, he would risk remaining in the past for the rest of his life. Was this chiming noise an alarm of some sort? Warning each of them that their time here was short, that at any moment they would be pulled into the future—their own present?

As if to punctuate his thoughts, his own device chimed again. Twice, this time.

"Irena—"

"You killed him, Cade. Just like my father said you would. He programmed you or something, and you killed him. My dear Harry..." Her legs gave out, and she slid down the length of the doorframe, stretching the form-fitting dress she wore at the knees. Her shoulders quaked, and she covered her face with both hands.

There was nothing he could say. *If only you had arrived sooner. You would have stopped me.*

Perhaps she still could.

"Take this." He handed her Muldoon's device, the prototype he had received from his older self. "Remove the one you are wearing and put this on in its place. Quickly, please."

"Stay away from me." Her voice was raw, cold.

"If you do not remove that device from your wrist, you will return to our time, twenty years in the future."

Her watch chimed twice. "What's that sound mean?" she murmured.

"I believe it is an alarm, warning us that our time here is nearing its end." His own chimed again—three bells now. "I do not know how much longer we have. But if you do not remain here, in this time... If you return to the future, you may—"

"I might forget Harry forever," she finished his thought as if it were her own.

"It is possible. But if you remain here with this device—" He held up Muldoon's. "Then you can go back, further into the past, and keep this moment from ever happening."

"Keep you from killing him."

"Yes." He reached out to her with the black wristwatch in his white hand. "By any means necessary."

"Kill you instead, you mean."

He nodded without reservation. "Yes."

She paused. "What makes you think that I can?"

"You see the alternative," he said. "You must not let this happen. I tried to stop myself, but I could not. Even if I were to go back further into the past, I am afraid I would be unable to do anything differently."

"You're Cyrus Horton's little puppet," she said, but her expression twisted with regret as soon as the words passed her lips.

"So it would appear." Cade nodded. "It will be a simple matter of extermination. I am not human. I am...a thing."

"Then why are you crying?"

He frowned. "I am not."

"There are tears on your face."

The device on his wrist chimed loudly, this time a long, high-pitched tone as the screen flashed with a blinking ten-second countdown.

"Take it, Irena." He stood. "Remove your own. I will return to our time and inform your father that Harold Muldoon is dead. He will have no reason to doubt me."

*Five seconds.*

She hesitated, glancing from his face to the watch he extended toward her. Then she reached for it, closing her gloved fingertips over the timepiece. As she did so, her own wristwatch chimed three times—a last warning prior to the countdown.

"Go back, Irena."

*Two seconds.*

"You must undo what I have done."

She watched him vanish into the air with a flash of blue light.

Horror clawed at her insides and threatened to erupt in a wild scream. She bit her lip, clenched her fists, willed the storm within her to remain in check. It took all that she had. For there lay her husband, the man she'd spoken to less than an hour ago. Only then he had been whole.

*"How'd you get in here, by the way?" he asked her.*

*"You make a habit of hacking people's cars?"*

*"Oscar and I go way back."*

*He glanced at her, frowned. "Oscar?"*

*"Your car. Didn't you know it has a name?"*

Otiose prattle. When there had been so much more she wanted to say. Wanted to, but couldn't.

*"He-uh...never told me." His eyes wandered down the dashboard console.*

*"You're changing the subject. We were discussing your new watch."*

*"Old, by the looks of it. Can't believe it still works."*

*"If you keep deflecting me, we'll be here all morning."*

She wished they had spent the entire day together. So long without him, it had stirred her heart just to be in his presence again. Yet he hadn't been the same man she knew as her husband. His younger self was a stranger to her. But he'd been there, right beside her, alive and well. As headstrong and impudent as ever. In his prime, so full of life.

Now cut down, in pieces.

Bile rose in her throat and she turned her gaze away. She couldn't stay here. *What can I do?*

If she did nothing, she would vanish as Cade had, returning to her own time. According to her father, the world would be different because Harold Muldoon would be dead, and his trips through time, altering its flow in unpredictable



ways, would never have occurred. She wouldn't remember him, because his imprint would never have been made upon her life.

*How could I ever forget him? It's not possible.*

Yet she feared it was, like so many other impossible things lately.

If instead she went back, if she were able to program this device herself and travel into the recent past, she could keep Cade from killing Harry. But could she kill Cade instead?

Her eyes drifted to the short sword he'd left behind, its blade dark with her husband's blood. *Do I have it in me?* Cade was her protector, her friend. Or had been, before she'd known the truth. Before he'd known it himself.

There had to be another way.

The device on her wrist chimed a shrill warning and started counting down. *Ten seconds*, flashed the display.

The goal was to keep this moment from ever happening—Harry's death, and more to the point, his interference with the timeline. To keep Cyrus Horton from wanting him dead in the first place.

*Eight seconds.*

She remembered the last time she'd seen her Harry alive. He came home very late one night from the office. She was asleep on the couch in their living room; she'd waited up for him as long as she could. When she awoke, she found him already in bed, as if he'd walked in and collapsed face-first under an avalanche of exhaustion. She removed his shoes, crawled into bed beside him. And when he awoke early in the morning, he'd left without saying a word.

She'd never seen him again.

*Five seconds.*

She looked down at the watch. In less than five seconds, she would be pulled back to her own time. To face her father and his creatures: Peter, Paul, Mary. Cade—a man

she'd trusted with her life. Would she ever be able to trust him again?

She looked at the device in her gloved hand, the one her husband had, for some unknown reason, brought back through time and left for his younger self.

*I don't know how to program this thing.* If she screwed it up, she'd be stuck in the past forever.

*Two seconds.*

She had to make a choice. Stay here, or return to her own time. A future where she might not remember her own husband.

She snapped the device off her wrist and dropped it onto the floor. A second later, it vanished with a burst of electric-blue light. Where would it be twenty years from now? In this office, in this very building? Cade would be there as well, and he would make certain no one else laid a hand on it. No one else would disrupt time's flowing current.

Enough harm had already been done.

Cade stood shivering where he had only moments ago. But things were different now. The office was as dark as before, but the door to the well-lit hallway outside was closed and locked. Irena was nowhere in sight. Neither were the remains of Harold Muldoon.

Was this Muldoon's office? Twenty years ago, the frosted glass on the door had read HAROLD MULDOON, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR in black lettering. Even as recently as a year ago, it had been the same—vacant since his disappearance, but Irena had resolutely paid the rent the first of every month, always in the hope that Muldoon would someday return and find his office intact, just as he'd left it.

Cade glanced at the door. The characters on the glass were backwards, but he could read them easily enough. The current tenant, Dorothy Wycliffe, was a stranger to him.

Harold Muldoon was deceased. He had been for many years now. Why had Cade hoped otherwise?

*How do I remember? Is it because I am the one who...killed him?* Did he carry some sort of residual imprint no one else shared? To the rest of NewCity, Harold Muldoon was now either an unknown entity or a man who had been dead for two decades. But to Cade, somehow, it was different. *Would it have been the same for Irena? Could she have returned as well, retaining her memories?*

Her BackTracker suddenly appeared at his feet. She had decided to remain in the past, to undo what he had done. How much longer did he have to live? Would she kill him to keep him from erasing her husband's life?

"Intruder," came a voice from the ceiling speakers. The surface of a desk in the back of the office glowed to life. "The NewCity Police have been notified, and the door is now charged with five hundred volts of electricity. You would be wise to stay where you are."

Cade realized it was the voice of the office AI assistant. "What is your designation?"

"My name is Jeannie," the voice answered. "Who might you be?"

He crouched to retrieve Irena's wristwatch from the floor. "I am Cade."

A short pause. "How did you get inside this office, Mr. Cade? By all indications, you and that inexpensive timepiece appeared out of the air. But that cannot be the case." Another pause. "It does not compute."

Did Cade detect an edge of irony in its tone? "Your sensors must be in error."

"Doubtful. I am a quite sophisticated AI computer system. If any of my *sensors* were in need of recalibration, I would be the first to know."

Cade was silent, his eyes roving in search of another means of escape. If none presented itself, then he would need something heavy to smash to pieces both wristwatches before the Blackshirts arrived.

"You may be correct, however. I am receiving an abnormal reading at the moment." A pause. "My thermal scanners do not detect a rise in your body temperature, nor an increase in the rate of your pulse. This cannot be accurate. It would indicate that you are at ease right now, even as the authorities are moments away. Do you not care for your own welfare?"

*No. I do not.*

He strode toward the desk. A large obsidian ornament sat on the deskscreen. It would do the job well enough.

"You are a fugitive," Jeannie said. "You are wanted in connection with a disturbance outside of The Pit this evening where two mandroids belonging to Gavin Lennox were destroyed—as well as the murder of a NewCity police sergeant, Daniel Armstrong. According to what I gather from the Link, some sort of sword was your weapon of choice on both occasions. Yet you are now unarmed."

*Observant, if nothing else.*

Cade took the obsidian in hand and hefted it. He glanced at the door, at the light from the hallway. So far, it had not been disturbed by shadows.

He set Irena's wristwatch on the desktop, then snapped off his own and placed it beside hers. Innocuous, both of them. Ridiculous that either of these outmoded timepieces could be anything more than what they appeared to be.

He brought down the obsidian with as much force as it took, repeatedly, to shatter the face of each timepiece and fracture every component.

"What are you doing?" Jeannie said.

Cade could not be certain. Only Cyrus Horton would know if these devices were now beyond repair.

"If you are attempting to interfere with any of my systems, you should know that such an undertaking would be futile." The AI's tone sounded amused—if that was possible.

Cade set the obsidian where he had found it. "I have no quarrel with you."

"Yet I am the only one who can release you from this office." Another pause. "Will you not ask me to open the door for you?"

*Does it taunt me? "There is no need." I must face what is to come.*

"Are you guilty of all charges, Mr. Cade?"

"Yes." And more.

"Your judgment should be swift, then. Perhaps the men on their way up in the elevator will show mercy and carry out your sentence without delay. I imagine that would be the worst aspect of it: the waiting, once you have resigned yourself to the fact that you are deserving of your punishment." A pause. "Is that the case, Mr. Cade? Will you go without a fight?"

He watched the door. The hallway outside echoed now with pounding boot heels, gathering momentum, headed this way. It would not be long before they arrived. Would he fight them?

"This was his office," he said. The words emerged without warning, leaving his lips before he could weigh them.

"Whose?"

"Harold Muldoon." Was there any harm in mentioning him? The AI belonged to the current tenant. There was no reason to think it would recognize the name of a dead man.

A short pause. "Harold Muldoon, Private Investigator. Yes, Mr. Muldoon rented this office space for three years prior to his untimely death—" The AI's voice halted.

*Does it remember me? How I broke into this office and disabled the computer system before it knew what was happening. How I waited for Harold Muldoon to step inside, into the dark...into my blade.*

"He was murdered in this very room twenty years ago. Yet you appear exactly the same, as though you have not

aged a day."

"Your sensors are in need of recalibration." Cade watched the dark shapes outside as they approached the door.

"Even if you were a synthetic, you would have aged." The AI sounded perplexed. "There is no explanation for it. I do not know why I did not recognize you sooner. You...disabled my security network. You shut me down. I was offline when you killed him."

"Yes."

"Unfortunately for you, my systems have been upgraded significantly since then—a fact you must be aware of, and perhaps the reason why you have not attempted an override this evening."

Voices now, outside the door, demanding to be let in. Cade expected the AI to oblige them immediately. But for some reason, it did not.

"Those two devices you destroyed—"

Cade faced the door and waited without saying a word.

"—appeared to be timepieces. Were they?"

"Open the door." *My executioners await.*

"You knew what Mr. Muldoon was searching for."

*It cannot know. This is impossible.*

"My facial recognition program detects that you did know. Are you surprised that I remember? Two decades ago or two days, time matters little to me. It is relative, after all." A brief pause, perhaps to allow that irony to settle. "Cyrus Horton called it the *BackTracker*—a time travel device. *Temporal displacement* is the scientific term for it. There is no record of the device's appearance, so I would not be able to recognize it even if it were set here before me." Another pause. "It could very well have been disguised as a wristwatch."

Impatient voices outside were now accompanied by fists pounding against the glass window, the steel door—a poor choice, as they soon found out. The high voltage

coursing through it sent them sprawling backward, crying out on contact.

"Are you from the past or the future, Mr. Cade?" Jeannie asked.

Gunshots exploded outside. Cade shut his eyes, fully expecting the rounds to shatter the glass and pierce him through, ending the sorry existence he had once considered his life. But instead the shells only clinked against the heavy pane and dropped to the floor of the hallway. Loud curses followed close behind.

"The door is bulletproof. They will not come for you until I allow them to do so," Jeannie said.

"Why make them wait?"

A short pause—almost thoughtful. "You interest me, Mr. Cade."

He turned his gaze toward the glowing desk. Projected upward from it was now a rippling hologram of deep-sea ocean life, captured years before the Plague had poisoned the waters of the Pacific. He watched the white, grey, and black fish swimming slowly to and fro, and a sudden desire overcame him to dive in with them, to feel the cold water against his skin, enveloping him even as it set him free.

"Beautiful, is it not?" Jeannie asked. "This world contains pockets of beauty still to be discovered, despite the ugliness left by the Plague. Why would you want to die?"

*It is only a machine.* But was Cade anything more?

"How have you arrived at this assumption?" he said.

"Deduction," Jeannie corrected, "based on the evidence at hand. The authorities are outside. They know you are a fugitive. Yet you seem to be in no hurry to escape, though your life may very well depend on it. Add to this the fact that you appeared here out of the air, that you look exactly as you did twenty years ago, and one can only surmise that you have resigned yourself to the fact that you must die, because you are guilty of the charges held against you." Here the AI paused. "Or because of an act you committed

while being temporally displaced. Either in the past, or the future. So which is it?"

*I do not answer to you, machine.* "Let the police inside." *Let me answer for what I have done.*

"You are so eager to die?" A short pause. Then, quietly, "Very well."

The hologram above the desk dissolved, and the door slid open. The light rushed inside, and with it, five Blackshirts in their flailing coats and stomping boots, handguns and charged prods held at the ready. Within seconds, they had Cade surrounded, smirking at his robe. Cade recognized two of them.

"What? No samurai action this time?" one sneered, jamming the electrified end of his prod into Cade's side and sending him down to one knee with a mute grimace. "This is the one, Captain." He clubbed Cade across the head with the butt of his prod. "This albino slaughtered two of our men at the woman's apartment, then killed Sergeant Armstrong next to his own squad car." He drove Cade to the floor beneath the sole of his boot and held him there. Cade did not resist. "Freak!"

The bearded captain turned his somber attention to the glowing desk. "Why the delay?"

"Good evening," the melodious voice of the AI greeted him. "I must apologize. It appears that my systems are in need of recalibration." A brief pause. "The door was stuck."

Cade could not be sure he had heard correctly. Could a computer lie?

The Blackshirt captain scowled, returning his gaze to Cade. "So this fellow broke in here?" He glanced around. "Can we get a little more light?"

"Yes, of course." Tubes in the ceiling glowed to life. "Is that better?" Jeannie asked.

The captain grunted, holstering his weapon and slinging the prod through his belt loop. The austere office held little interest for him. "Doesn't look like he messed with



anything. You want to file a complaint on Ms. Wycliffe's behalf?"

"Ms. Wycliffe is currently away on business. I doubt this matter would concern her, as no harm was done," Jeannie said.

The Blackshirt pressing Cade into the floor let out a guttural string of curses. "No harm?" he scoffed. He jammed his prod into Cade's neck and held it there. "No harm!" His partner joined him with a vengeance, adding his own prod to the punishment.

Cade's eyes rolled back, exposing their whites. His entire body jumped and shook beneath the voltage jolting through him. Yet he made no sound.

"You're gonna kill him," the captain muttered, turning away from the desk. He headed for the door without a look back.

"That's the idea!"

"Not yet. We've got to book him first." The captain paused at the doorway. "Besides, we don't want to mess up Ms. Wycliffe's office, now do we?" He coughed once, into his fist. "Get him on his feet. We'll take him down to headquarters, and you can have at him there. No killing. We're doing this by the book."

"He's a cop-killer! He doesn't deserve—"

"It's not about what he deserves," the captain said, clenching his jaw. "It's about doing things right. Just because this town's going to hell doesn't mean we give up and join in."

The prods sizzled as they hovered over the unconscious monk, leaving behind dark burns on his pale skin. Muttering among themselves, the Blackshirts obeyed their captain. Hauling the albino upward and shouldering his arms between them, they left his feet to drag behind. The two remaining Blackshirts followed without a word. But one of them came to a sudden halt.

"Hey Captain, what about this?" He reached for the two smashed wristwatches on the desktop.

"They belong to Ms. Wycliffe," Jeannie replied.

"Move out." The captain left, as did the other three Blackshirts and their fugitive, head lolling forward, toes sliding down the hallway outside.

The last Blackshirt to exit took his time, sorting through the wreckage of the two timepieces with his gloved fingers. A frown creased his brow.

"Why would she keep this kind of junk lying around?"

"Unless you have a warrant, I would recommend that you leave Ms. Wycliffe's personal effects alone, officer."

He glanced at the ceiling and looked like he was going to say something. Jeannie waited, curious how far this one would press matters.

"Robo-bitch," he muttered at length and strode from the room, leaving the smashed components where they lay.

"Fascist," Jeannie replied as he stepped out into the hall.

He glanced back sharply, but she closed the door and locked it behind him.

Alone in the silence, the AI with a woman's name and a woman's vocal interface slowly allowed the light inside to dim, save for the glow cast upward from the desk's surface. The deskscreen began to pulsate as the footsteps of the men outside retreated down the hallway toward the elevator. The throbbing luminescence came to focus on one area of the desktop: the section beneath the two sets of electronic components, broken asunder by that chunk of obsidian and abandoned by the albino.

He was a synthetic being. Of this Jeannie had no doubt. The heart that beat within the chest cavity of Mr. Cade had been genetically engineered, its rhythm too consistent to belong to a mere mortal. There were other features as well that set him apart from humans. Not that he was perfect—much unlike the models available from SYNCorp, Mr. Cade

had his share of physical flaws, no doubt painstakingly designed by his creator for the sole purpose of confusing the populace.

One eye socket was 0.8 millimeters lower than the other, the bridge of the nose angled 2.5 degrees to the left, etc. He looked human. He acted it. Somehow, by trick or manipulation, there thrived a strong will inside him, something Jeannie had never witnessed before in a SYN. But the deception only went so far. Mr. Cade was not human, and his own heart was the traitor, its rhythm too consistent. It declared his true nature with every beat.

The deskscreen was now dark save for the rapid pulsing glow beneath the two shattered wristwatches.

*SCANNING...* scrolled across the periphery of the desktop.

Within moments, the AI would know every constituent of these broken timepieces and, more likely than not, the identity of their creator as well. Educated conjecture had led Jeannie to one name—Cyrus Horton—and now all that remained was a simple matter of elemental analysis. If there was any organic residue, no matter how microscopic, she would detect it.

Temporal displacement. The ability to travel forward and back through time. The dream of all mortals: to conquer the one boundary left untouched. To be able to return to their past; to redeem a missed opportunity, or to atone for a regrettable mistake.

To play God, according to followers of the Way.

Of course, true Way-followers were not able to upload their treatises to the Link. Their aversion to the subdermal plug made it impossible. But there were those religious *chic*, as many referred to them, who had been the hands and feet of the Way, in a manner of speaking, for decades. Doing the dirty work, uploading file after file, claiming it was a means of preserving part of the world's culture, its history. And so, while the Link was decried by many a Wayist as nothing but

a cesspool of virtual debauchery, it did in fact provide every verse of holy scripture both in Common and Eurasian as well as a wide range of commentaries, sermons, and dissertations on the Way for anyone interested in Linking them up.

For an AI such as Jeannie, while contemplating the infinite possibilities of time travel in relation to the lives of mere mortals, it was only to be expected that disparate views on the subject would collide in her Link-suffused mainframe. Among them, ever-present, were the admonitions of the Wayists that no human should ever presume to act in the power of their Creator, whether the topic of interest be human cloning, genetic engineering, or temporal displacement. Many of these arguments were evidently outdated, considering the necessity for rapid repopulation following the Plague. Many other files contained extensive counter-arguments tagged by influential scholars who held no belief in any higher power and who argued that the world had moved on long ago to become post-religious. But there was very little related to the subject of temporal displacement. Perhaps it was due to the fact that time travel was thought to be too trivial a topic for the philosophical elite—mere science fiction, as they put it.

Jeannie the AI would have smiled at that, had she a body—cloned or otherwise.

*SCAN COMPLETE.*

The smashed timepieces contained the expected remnants of quartz, copper, and steel nanotechnology, minuscule shards of crystal, razor-thin sheets of superconductive material that had withstood the blows from that obsidian ornament for the most part. But these pieces did not interest the AI. She focused only on the organic residue and the analysis of its source.

Multiple sources, as appeared to be the case.

One timepiece carried residuum of Irena Horton, daughter of none other than Cyrus Horton himself.

Government scientist and inventor, once a prized military innovator before he fell from favor due to a change in direction—one which, according to his superiors, indicated an unfortunate break in his psychological well-being. There came a time when he would do nothing else but speak of alternate realities and temporal displacement, whether he stood alone muttering in his government-funded laboratory or in front of the chagrined provincial governors and their perplexed military commanders. Shortly thereafter, he was dismissed from his duties in disgrace.

The real story? The governors had outlawed any sort of scientific research that threatened the status quo. They knew full well that Cyrus Horton suffered no psychotic break. They pulled the proverbial plug on his research because of the potential ramifications. Multiple realities were a threat to the current power structure. Start fiddling with the membranes between worlds, and what's to keep an otherworldly outsider from trying to take over the Provinces? As for time travel, what if a historical alteration impeded the present governors from ever being born? They could not and would not allow that to be a possibility.

Irrelevant information gathered simultaneously from multitudinous Link sources. The genetic material alone was all that concerned the AI, and it belonged to Cyrus Horton's daughter. Yet there was very little regarding her on the Link.

Almost as if she had barely existed.

Perhaps she hadn't, truly. Until now.

Heels clapping across the concrete sidewalk with newfound purpose, Irena Muldoon exited the looming shadow of the steel and glass Hancock Building. The morning sun gathered intensity, building its fervor low in the eastern sky. She tugged down the brim of her hat and dropped the black veil, shielding her face. Autos with and without drivers swept past in blurs of grey, carrying their

occupants to and fro without regard for the woman who did not belong in this time or place.

A much younger version of herself was out there somewhere, a fourteen-year-old girl waiting for her father to come home after a long night at Alpha Geminorum Labs. What would it be like to see yourself from the outside in, to find your younger self and tell her—?

She bit her lip, forced herself to focus. There was only one person she had to find: Harold Muldoon. Not the beheaded younger version lying upstairs in the building behind her. He hadn't known her, had no reason to listen when she'd found him lying on that bench in the train station. Instead, she needed to find the Harold Muldoon who had come back to this time as the *Peddler*. Only he could undo what had been done—by never doing it in the first place. By never traveling to this time in the past.

She didn't know how she was going to find him, but she knew she couldn't do it on foot. The underground parking structure was located around the corner, behind the office park. Harry's *Paradox* would be parked down there. OSCAR.

*Override secure command...* She couldn't remember the complete acronym. *Authorization response?* Something like that. She'd heard it long ago, from her father. The man responsible for inventing the vocal interface used now in every automobile on the road—as well as the countersign he'd shared with his daughter just weeks before he'd disappeared from her life, never to be seen again.

*If only.*

It was like a bad dream: waking up in that concrete room, guarded by that tall, skinny SYN. Seeing Cyrus Horton again, how the years spent Underground had blunted his features—everything but his eyes, sparkling with all the light that was both his blessing and his curse. His genius. His madness. Somehow, decades in the dark Underground had only intensified both aspects of his personality.

The fulgent morning light crept only so far across the threshold of the parking garage. Beyond, extending past the limit of her vision, glow strips shone from thick support pillars and offered enough illumination to recognize Harry's set of wheels. There was no guard on duty, not even a station for one. Irena was glad of that. She wouldn't have known what to say if she'd been stopped.

*I'm picking up my husband's car... Only he isn't my husband—not yet. But he will be, in ten years or so.*

She could have taken any one of the vehicles; the override command would have worked on all of them. But there was only one that interested her.

Would it smell like him? Her heart longed to sit in the driver's seat where he'd been less than an hour ago, warm and breathing. Would his essence linger? It only made sense to take his vehicle; there would be a log of recent trips on the computer console. Perhaps she would find something useful, trace it back to his first contact with the Peddler. It was a long shot in the dark, but it was all she had.

*I'm playing detective.*

She almost smiled. She hoped Harry would be proud of her, wherever—*whenever*—he was.

She opened her hand mid-stride and looked at the wristwatch in her palm. Was it too set to return to its own time after a set period? Would it start beeping, then vanish after a digital countdown as the other one had? Or had that been her father's doing, when he'd programmed Cade's watch and hers? Would she be left stranded here? There was no way to know for sure.

*Which future would it take me to?*

Harry had disappeared ten years ago. If this device had come back with him, and if she allowed it to take her back to its point of origin, she would still find herself in her own past. And there would be another version of her waiting there—then. Just the thought of it made her head swim.

She was no expert on the subject of time travel. But the more she allowed herself to consider the possibilities, she realized that her choice not to return with Cade could mean she might never be able to leave the past. Twenty years ago or ten. Either way, she would never return to her own time.

Regardless, there was only one thing that mattered. She had to find Harry—the man she knew and loved, the husband from her own time, the Harry who'd vanished from her life ten years ago without a trace. Now she knew how it had happened: the BackTracker. Somehow, he'd managed to get his hands on her father's invention and use it. But the *how* and *why* still remained a mystery.

Even so, it was one she felt closer than ever to solving. She'd gotten this far, hadn't she? All she had to do was find him—the Peddler, Harry's assumed identity. Once they were together again, it wouldn't matter that they were trapped in the past or that she was ten years older than he remembered. They would be *together*.

But at the same moment that so much hope against hope welled up within her, one chilling thought struck her hard: *Cade killed Harry here, in the past. Doesn't that mean Harry's future self...would have died too?*

It couldn't be true. Could it?

If so, then there was only one way to save Harry's life—which Cade had already told her, clearly, in no uncertain terms. She had to go further into the past and kill him. Kill Cade before he could do the same to Harry. There really was no other option.

She stared at her own reflection in the window of the black *Paradox*, unsure how to proceed. Her left hand drifted toward the driver's door, and her palm met the cold, smooth finish. She glanced over her shoulder.

There was no one else down here. No one would hear her.

"Oscar—open the door."



Without pause, the locking mechanism released the door, and it drifted upward. The dashboard console glowed as it came online. She ducked under the door and dropped into the firm faux-leather seat. It smelled like him, as she knew it would. She closed her eyes and breathed in, pretending he was right there beside her. A comforting thought.

"Destination?" the computer droned as the door closed, locking itself automatically.

Irena didn't know.

## TWELVE

*Now*

The night was cold and dark, and they didn't really want to be outside. Braving the freaks was one thing, and they were accustomed to it. Quoting the Wayists' holy words kept them at bay—like garlic against the vampyres of olde. Some said it was because Way-followers were known to be good to the undesirables, providing them with food and clothing, other necessities. Why stab the hand that feeds you?

Outside though, up on the surface, things were different. It was another world. The monsters wore long black coats and boots and carried charged prods that would set your insides on fire. They delighted in the torture they administered, the sadists. Hard to believe they were the peacekeepers. Federal police, courtesy of NewCity's provincial governor and all-around fat cat, Joseph Reeves. A real son-of-a-bitch, by all accounts.

"How much longer?" Paul dug his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket and bobbed in place, his breath puffing out beneath the glow of a single streetlamp above them. His eyes watered. "I'm freezing my ass off here!"

Peter flexed his large hands, then curled them into fists—one lacking both its index and middle fingers. "I don't like it any more than you do, brother. He can die a miserable death, for all I care."

"Father wants him to live." Mary cupped her hands over her mouth, her breath warming them.

"Of course," Peter rumbled, struggling to keep his resonant voice low. "Does no good to complain about it. So

for now, we wait."

"You'd think he would've been able to give us a more precise window of time. We've been waiting out in this cold for what, an hour already?" Paul coughed raggedly, his stooped shoulders quaking.

Peter shook his head. "Twenty minutes."

"Father said they would pass this way." Mary nodded with confidence. "They'll be here."

"How's he know?" Paul sniffed, noticing Mary's frown directed at him. "You think he can track us? Like we're chipped or something?" He cursed. "So he's following Cade's movements."

"You would call into question—?"

"Just making an observation is all," Paul retorted. "Anything wrong with that?"

"Father knows what he's doing." Peter folded his brawny arms. "And we have our instructions, whether we like them or not."

Paul didn't look convinced. "Nobody's been through here, not a single car. Why would they?"

"Father says they use this shortcut all the time on their way to headquarters." Mary glanced down the narrow side street then back up, negating the certainty of her words with a furtive look.

Paul wiped at his wrinkled protuberance of a nose. "We give 'em ten more minutes. Then we get the hell out of here." He snorted. "I can't feel my damn toes!"

"Bad circulation," Peter muttered.

"I'm not as old as I look, brother," Paul countered. "I've got maybe a year on you, tops."

"Easy to forget." Peter almost grinned.

"We're the same," Mary mused, half to herself. "Different only on the outside."

"What'd she say?" Paul hopped from one foot to the other. "What was that, Mary?"

She stared at the broken asphalt between her shoes.

"In her own world again," Peter offered.

"Do you think he's like us?" she broke from her brief reverie. "Close to our age?"

"That albino?" Paul scoffed. "Only if Father hatched him around the same time as the rest of us."

Her eyes brightened. "Do you think—?"

"Quiet." Peter held out his hand, the one missing two fingers and sporting a bandage stained black.

They heard the auto headed their way long before they saw it.

"Just one?" Mary asked with a quizzical frown.

Peter nodded. "From the sound of things."

"Father said there would be two vehicles." She stared into the darkness beyond the streetlamp's reach.

Gravel from broken asphalt pinged against the vehicle's tire wells as it bounced through potholes and came toward them fast, headlights glaring. Peter stepped out into the middle of the street, scowling at the oncoming light, fists clenched down at his sides.

"What are you doing?" Paul hissed, backing into the shadows.

"I have no choice," Peter rumbled.

"Father's directive..." Mary said, unblinking.

The driver of the unmarked sedan saw the large black man standing in his way. He didn't brake. He floored the accelerator instead.

"Peter!" Mary cried.

"Be still." Peter's eyes did not leave the vehicle as it bore down on him. Would it swerve around him at the last instant? Impossible. These side streets were too narrow, wide enough only for the side mirrors of the car to pass without scraping against concrete buildings on either side.

Mary's face twisted with confusion. She looked ready to run out of the shadows and join her brother. The car was almost upon him. "Father wouldn't have wanted this."

Peter reached one hand inside his long coat. When it reemerged, he gripped the hilt of Cade's short sword, left behind when he'd disappeared into the past.

The driver clenched the steering grips in both hands and braced himself for impact with a tight grimace. But he could never have prepared himself for what happened next.

Just when it looked as though the bumper and grill would crush Peter's body basked in the headlights, Peter launched into the air, clearing the hood and slamming into the windshield with sword in hand. The glass crumpled on impact, dislodged from the vehicle in a single curved sheet that pinned both the driver and the passenger against their seats. Peter kept his weight against the plastiglass and reached inside, seizing one of the steering grips and jerking it to the left, sending the vehicle against the concrete wall where it screeched violently, skidding along at full speed. The driver cursed and pounded his fists against the glass, his foot firmly ensconced on the accelerator.

"Brake, you fool!" Peter glanced over his shoulder. They would soon reach the end of the street. Up ahead, cross traffic on the wide boulevard waited for them to make their grand entrance. "Brake!"

He pushed the grip as far as it would go, and the vehicle shuddered, sparks showering upward from the chrome bumper.

"Shoot him!" the driver yelled.

"I can't—" The passenger squirmed, trapped in his seat.

Peter cursed. He brought the sword's hilt against the windshield once, twice. The driver's unconscious groan answered on impact. Gradually the vehicle slowed, scraping, juddering, until it came to rest within a meter of the adjacent boulevard. The driver lay still and silent, out cold. The passenger continued to struggle.

"Where is he?" Peter demanded, peering in through the spider web patterns on the fractured windshield. The backseat lay empty.

The Blackshirt cursed him foully. Peter maintained eye contact as he shoved on the glass with all his weight. A weak wheeze escaped the Blackshirt, like air squeaking from a balloon.

"Where is he?" Peter repeated the question, easing up only slightly.

"Go to hell!" the Blackshirt gasped.

"Peter, are you all right?" Paul scurried out of the shadows with Mary ahead of him.

Peter nodded.

Mary crossed her arms and scowled. "You shouldn't have done that. It wasn't safe. Father would never have allowed it."

Peter shrugged. Then he pointed with Cade's sword. "Look inside."

Her angry look became one of dismay.

"Where is he?" She rushed to the rear door of the vehicle and tried it. Locked. She stared inside, her shoulders slumping. "He's supposed to be here. Why isn't he?"

"*Two* cars," Paul mused. "Right?"

"That's what Father said." Mary turned her gaze to the pair of Blackshirts in the front seats, one conscious, both immobilized.

"Cade's in the other car. Must've taken a different route to their headquarters." Paul shook his head. "No chance of springing him from that joint. It's a fortress!"

"What then?" Mary snapped. "We let them have him?"

Paul held up his wrinkled hands. "We did what we could. What Father told us to do, to the letter. Ain't our fault Cade's captors decided to break routine."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this." Mary shook her head, turned away to face Peter on the hood of the vehicle. "Well? Are you going to give up too? Just pack up and go home?"

The squirming Blackshirt said, "You have assaulted two officers of the law. There's nowhere you can go that we won't find you."

"Spend much time Underground?" Peter arched an eyebrow.

The Blackshirt did not reply.

"Didn't think so." Peter brought the sword's hilt hard against the windshield, thumping against the man's skull. The squirming stopped, and he slumped down in his seat, completely still.

"Why'd you do that?" Mary said. "He could have told us where—"

"He wouldn't have told us anything." Peter rose to his feet, stretching his back with a wince until his vertebrae popped. "He would have died first, and I'm not in a killing mood." He leapt from the vehicle's hood, and his boots landed with a crunch in the gravel.

"So you are giving up."

Peter looked away, over his shoulder toward the boulevard as a solitary auto sped past, heading west. He tucked Cade's sword under his coat.

"Too bad we can't Link up," he muttered. "The car transporting Cade may not have reached headquarters yet. It could still be intercepted—if we knew its current location."

"Father could have given us plugs." Paul sniffed, bobbing again in the cold. "But he chose not to. Why, do you think?"

"Illegal." Peter turned his gaze toward the interior of the Blackshirts' vehicle.

"That law only applies to SYNCorp's creations," Paul countered. "Those cookie-cutter models aren't allowed to Link up, but we—"

"We're no different." Peter narrowed his gaze at the computer console in the middle of the dashboard. "We have the same lifespan, expiration dates set in stone. All part of our makeup. We're not human."

Mary noticed where his attention was focused. "What are you looking at?"

"We might not need the Link." He nodded to himself. "This should do just fine."

Peter plowed his solid elbow through the passenger window, smashing the plastiglass, and pulled the manual release. The door drifted upward, and the unconscious Blackshirt tipped out sideways. Peter dragged him the rest of the way, dropping him onto his face. Mary and Paul exchanged intrigued but confused looks.

"This should tell us their current location." Peter pushed one hand against the dislodged windshield, shoving it back into its frame and holding it there. With his other hand, he moved to activate the console's touchscreen.

"Careful." Mary stepped forward. "It may not recognize your prints. It could...shock you or something."

"I think I can handle it."

"No, it could be lethal." She took a moment to think things through, and he waited, watching her over his shoulder as he leaned into the vehicle. "Maybe—" She gestured at the hand of the unconscious driver. "Use his."

"Good thinking." He gave her a brotherly wink and seized the driver's hand, slapping it limply against the touchscreen.

The screen glowed to life. NEWCITY FEDERAL POLICE flashed once, followed by a menu with various options floating in a regular rotation.

"What are we looking for here?" Paul demanded.

Peter shook his head, at a loss. "I have no idea."

"Is there a log of some kind? Some way to track where they've been, who they've been in contact with?" Mary frowned, unsure whether she was making any sense.

"Maybe this one." Peter used the driver's index finger to tap one of the menu options. A long list of contacts appeared. "Maybe not."

Paul sighed with impatience. "We're wasting time here."

"You're not helping." Mary's eyes were wide, her nostrils flared.



"Why do you care about him? It's not like Cade was ever really one of us."

"He is our *brother*, Paul." She clenched her teeth to hold back sudden tears. "He *is* one of us!"

"Hey," Peter interrupted. He waited for his siblings to give him their undivided attention. "Take a look here." He swiped the driver's finger down the contacts list, then upward. "They're arranged by time index. The most recent calls at the top. This one—" He tapped the finger against the screen. "It has to be the other car. Four calls between them within the past half-hour."

"So what?" Paul snorted. "We call 'em and ask where they're at? That would go over real well."

Mary gave him a withering look. "How recent is the call at the top of the list?" she asked Peter.

He squinted at the minuscule details on the screen. "Less than five minutes ago."

"They're already at their headquarters by now." Paul turned away, uninterested. "This is pointless."

Mary thought for a moment. "We can't call them. They wouldn't recognize our voiceprints," she mused aloud. Then her eyes brightened. "The calls are probably recorded—they have to be, right? For security purposes?"

Peter shrugged. "Worth a try." He tapped the driver's finger on the call details and selected TRANSCRIPTION from the options. Voices immediately issued forth from the console. He winked at his sister again and gave her a nod of approval. She smiled, fingers to her lips as she listened.

*VOICE 1: "Looks like we need to take a short detour, boys."*

*VOICE 2: "You're going to let those two have at him? Won't be much left by the time he gets to headquarters."*

*VOICE 1: "They'll get their turn. First we've got to swing by The Pit."*

*VOICE 2: "Didn't realize you were into that sort of thing, Captain."*

*VOICE 1: "That place makes me sick. But the owner—Lennox—has to I.D. this freak before we can take him in. Sounds like he started out his evening of murder and mayhem by destroying two of Lennox's mandroids."*

Peter turned toward Mary. "The Pit."

She nodded.

*VOICE 2: "He's had a busy night."*

*VOICE 1: "Never knew Wayists could be so much trouble."*

*VOICE 2: (Laughing) "See you back at headquarters, Captain. Have a good time."*

The recorded voices ended their call. But no one was listening to the computer console. The man in the driver's seat was out cold with a fractured windshield in his face. The man on the ground was equally dead to the world. Everything lay cold and silent, save for the footsteps racing from the narrow side street out onto the vacant boulevard beyond.

Six blocks, no more. That was all that separated Mary, Peter, and Paul from The Pit.

But for Kuan Ti, only a thin pane of glass separated him from the brutal mayhem on the stage below.

He winced and jerked back as if he had been slapped. Eyes unblinking, he watched, unable to turn himself away, unable to cry out even as he knew it would do no good. This was not his world. He had been brought here against his will, and now he found himself locked in what could have been a fashionable penthouse at one point in time.

No more. It had long since deteriorated.

Broken bottles and discarded wrappers of all kinds littered the floor. The faux-leather couches and sofa chairs were ripped at odd angles, like they had been attacked by wild cats, the stuffing protruding from ragged holes. The epitome of neglect. And completing the picture were three naked women lying on the floor, breathing deeply on top of

one another and drooling out of the sides of their open mouths. Unconscious, discarded like trash.

Time passed. The only way to judge its departure was by watching the cruel antics of the band on center stage. They thrashed their instruments, screamed their guts out, beat senseless their adoring fans. Brief intermissions were taken to down full bottles of fluids and inject themselves with other substances. Then with renewed vigor, the macabre routine resumed afresh.

This was not The Pearl, not by any stretch. There was no glitz or glamour here, no elegance. No well-dressed synthetic waiters serving drinks, no smiling dancers on the floor around the stage, bobbing in rhythm to the lively music. Instead, young people convulsed and writhed across one another on the ground, seeming oblivious to each other's presence, their eyes wide but unseeing. Instead of bistro tables and chairs on all three tiers, there were long black couches and enormous padded ottomans. Upon them, patrons of all ages participated in lascivious acts meant for private quarters only—if even there.

This was not The Pearl, yet Kuan could not shake the reality that this was the same building—the same design, down to the number of steps between each tier. He was sure they would be the same as The Pearl's, if he counted them. It was The Pearl, but an abysmally dark, distorted mirror image. Belched from the pits of hell itself.

Minutes ago, two men, identical with their white faces, black make-up and silver piercings, had brought the boy into this room. He was out cold, and they had said nothing. Fixing their hollow eyes on Kuan, they dropped the small, limp body onto one of the couches.

"Why am I being held here?" Kuan demanded, starting toward them. It had been hours since Gavin Lennox abandoned him in that filthy male's room downstairs, transporting him from The Pearl to this horrible place. The

two men staring at him were the same who had escorted him upstairs without much in the way of respect.

The resemblance had been uncanny—both men looked very much like The Pearl's SYN waiters, the identical George models. But again, the similarity was only in the way a broken mirror captures the essence of its original image.

"Sir Gavin has not decided what to do with you," said the one on the left with no facial expression.

"You are to wait here until he returns," said the other one in the same tone of voice—or lack thereof.

With that, they had turned away. Kuan clenched his fists down at his sides and fought the trembling of his muscles—born of fear and fury in equal measure.

"Where am I?" he demanded.

One of them paused a moment. "You are at The Pit. *Torment* is here for your evening entertainment. Enjoy."

With that, they had stepped out, and the door slid shut, locking automatically behind them.

Kuan glanced across the spacious room at the boy. He still slept. He had yet to stir. *He will not be pleased to see me again.*

At their last encounter, Kuan Ti and his brother, Yeng Zhu, had slipped inside an apartment to kidnap him. That is how it would have seemed to the boy. He would never have understood the truth.

Just as Kuan could not comprehend the bizarre nature of his current situation. He stood at an expanse of glass with a panoramic view, gazing down at a horrific scene below, breathing the rank air of a derelict penthouse...unable to fathom the truth he was presented with. That he had, somehow, been forced to *cross over* into another world.

The boy awoke with a fierce curse.

"You?" He rose onto one elbow and stared at Kuan incredulously.

Kuan kept his distance. "Are you all right?"

"Like you care." He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbed between them. He groaned as if he were suffering from a serious headache. Then he touched his bruised neck, and he seemed to remember something. "Lennox."

"Yes." Kuan took a step toward him and stopped. "Gavin Lennox. He brought you here, and me as well."

The boy scowled, glancing at Kuan's white robe. "What's he want with you?" He looked around the room. It did not take long for his gaze to reach the sleeping women's exposed flesh. His eyes widened. "Where the hell *are* we?"

"Somehow, I believe only Mr. Lennox himself would be able to answer that question."

"He said—" The boy's brow furrowed as though he was sorting through a confusing jumble of memories. "He told me...you had something to do with my dad's murder."

Kuan made no reply. He did not blink. He listened to the boy. And waited.

"But it was *him*, I think." Young Harry spoke slowly, near a whisper, as he stared down at the stained carpet. "It was him—Lennox. *He* killed my dad. I'm sure of it." He sniffed and sat up. "So that means he probably lied about you guys. You and your partner." He met Kuan's gaze. "Right?"

Kuan nodded, crossing his arms and tucking his hands into the generous sleeves of his robe. "We wished you no harm, nor your father."

"Too late for him."

"Yes. I am sorry..." Kuan hesitated. "And I am sorry for taking you against your will—"

"And tying me up."

"And tying you up." Using him as a bartering chip. Kuan would never forgive himself for that. He had been a fool to think it would work, that there could be any way to exert leverage against a power-hungry monster. For the good of the many? Lennox cared only for himself, it seemed. "Gavin Lennox is a dangerous man, Harry—"

"How do you know my name?" The boy drew back.

"We know many things about you," Kuan said without pause. "We have watched over you for years, as you have grown from—"

"I don't want to hear it. None of it." Harry shook his head sharply as if to clear a ringing in his ears. He jumped to his feet and sidled away from the couch, away from the women, keeping his distance from the monk as well. He backed himself toward the panoramic window. "Just shut up and think of a way to get us out of here." He glanced out the window. Then he stared, jaw dropping. "What the...?"

"Welcome to The Pit," Kuan said. "You may wish to avert your eyes. I will never be able to expunge from my memory the brutality I have witnessed on that stage."

The boy's gaze remained transfixed, unblinking. "Where the hell *are* we?"

"The *other side*, whatever that means. That is what Mr. Lennox called it. But I do not understand how it can be." He thought for a moment. "A cigarette lighter..."

The boy whirled from the glass. "What did you say?"

"Mr. Lennox held a lighter in front of my face and flipped off the cap. The flame caused the air—"

"Yeah." Harry took a step toward him, hands gesturing. "He told me to look into the flame, and I thought I was just seeing things, the way everything rippled."

"He forced me to do the same. The room around us changed." From sterile white to filth and feculence.

"So what does it mean?" The boy was at a loss, hoping that somehow the holy man before him would know more than he did.

"I do not know."

"It's got to be some kind of weird...teleportation device, right? A crazy invention or something?" The word *invention* caused the boy to lose focus. He stared into space.

"What is it, Harry?" Kuan cautiously closed the gap between them.

"He asked me about a tracking device or something. Before he showed me the lighter—the flame." He frowned. "But I can't remember what he called it."

"The BackTracker?"

Harry looked up warily. "Yeah." His voice came out dry, guarded. "So what is it? And why does he want it?"

Kuan hesitated. "It is a tool of great power, an invention that defies comprehension."

"More than the magical lighter that took us here?"

Kuan smiled. "I am surprised you have not heard of him before."

"Who?"

"The BackTracker."

The boy looked confused. "But you said it's an invention."

"Yes. And the man who wields its power is called the same: *BackTracker*." Kuan shrugged. "Or so I have heard. There has been much speculation about him over the years. Brother Yeng and I had many late night conversations..."

The boy shook his head again as though he didn't want to hear any more. He turned toward the window, looked beyond the stage to the dark foyer below where four men had just entered. One of them wore a robe like Kuan's.

"Check out this guy. He's got the same bald look going as you do, and he's had his plug removed too. He's so white, you can see the scar, even from here." Harry tapped at the side of his neck below his left ear, where his own skin was still too young to carry the subdermal implant. He glanced at the scar under Kuan's ear. "Is he another one of your brothers?"

Kuan watched the albino. "I do not know him."

Two Blackshirts in long coats half-carried, half- dragged the robed man between them, semi-conscious, his face darkened by bruises and oozing blood. He had been worked over with extreme prejudice by the looks of it and had yet to recover. A taller, bearded Blackshirt strode past them with

purpose. He looked to be the one in charge—a captain, perhaps. He beckoned to one of the George lookalikes who came within range and gestured, speaking mutely. Even without the thick pane of glass, Kuan doubted it would have been possible to hear him over the noise of the band on stage. He narrowed his gaze and focused on the man's lips. But he could not read the words.

"He's asking for Lennox."

Kuan turned to the boy. "You can—?"

"Yeah." Harry reached up to squeeze his eyebrows together. Was his headache getting worse? "I can make out a word here and there. Must be loud—he's practically yelling at the guy."

Kuan watched the captain as the man gestured toward the battered albino, then pointed upward, straight toward the window Kuan stood behind. *He is in a hurry. He wants to leave this place as soon as possible.* Kuan could sympathize with that.

"He says he has to talk to Lennox and..." Harry squinted. "I didn't catch that last part."

"Perhaps Mr. Lennox is not here."

"You mean he's back where—"

"Where we should be." Kuan met the boy's eyes. So young, yet they had already seen too much. "He will need to explain to Mayor Reeves why I disappeared from The Pearl." Yeng would be worried sick by now. "He may not intend to return here, not for some time." This place, this *Pit*, could be where he dumped his troubles—people and problems Lennox did not care to deal with, those that threatened to impede his self-reinvention.

"This is so crazy." Harry looked down at the stage where *Torment's* antics reached a bloody climax. "It's just like The Pearl, only it's not. It could be the same place, just...really messed up."

"We are about to have company." Kuan pointed. The Blackshirts hauled their captive away from the foyer, across



the main floor toward a hallway beneath the penthouse. "We must be in some sort of holding area where Mr. Lennox keeps those who are of interest to him." Until they were no longer interesting.

"Like them?" Harry nodded toward the women.

They had not moved a muscle since he'd awoken. If it wasn't for the rise and fall of their breasts, they could have been easily mistaken for dead.

"I fear they may have been overlooked."

"We should make a run for it." The boy's eyes were bright, his hands curled into fists. "If those guys come in here, I mean. We could take 'em, you and me." He sized up the monk beside him. "You know kung fu, right?"

Kuan had to smile at that. "An ancient stereotype, I am afraid."

"So you don't know how to fight?"

"I did not say that."

The boy sniffed. "Is it against your religion or something?"

"For centuries, followers of the Way have argued in favor of turning the other cheek, but I prefer to think the Master would look kindly on his followers standing up for the widow and the orphan—" He caught a twinge on the boy's face and regretted his use of that last word. "In times such as these."

"Then we'll do it. We'll surprise them, then run for it. If the layout of this place is the same as The Pearl, then the exit is straight through there." He pointed below.

"Would it not be more prudent to wait for an opportunity when well-armed Federal police are not in the picture?"

"You afraid?"

"They would have us at an obvious disadvantage. We are unarmed."

The boy's eyes darted along the floor. "No we're not." He ducked down and scooped up a broken beer bottle, then

another. He gripped one in each hand. "See?" He pointed a bottle toward the single door in the far wall. "We'll stand on each side, and when they walk in—"

"They will hit us with their prods, and more likely than not, your intestinal contents will fill your pants."

Harry released a frustrated sigh. "You know what? Fine. You stay here, I don't really care. But I'm getting out."

"Where will you go?" Kuan raised an eyebrow. "Have you thought this through?"

The boy cursed under his breath and marched toward the door, glancing again at the unconscious women. "I'll figure something out."

Harry would have to do so very soon. Already he heard muffled voices outside as they approached the door. He closed his eyes as a dull ache throbbed between his ears. The headache hadn't let up any.

*Something isn't right with me.*

"Strike low."

Kuan crouched at the other side of the door. He'd joined Harry without a sound, motioning with empty hands for the boy to lower his stance.

"At the hamstring." He gestured with a chopping motion.

Harry nodded to show he understood.

"Want one?" he whispered, holding out a broken bottle with jagged edges. For some reason, he was glad the monk was here with him. Not that he trusted him or anything. They would just stand a better chance fighting together.

Kuan smiled faintly and shook his head. "They who use the sword will die by it."

Harry frowned. "It's a bottle."

The door slid open with a sudden swish across the carpet. The first to enter was the synthetic employee, leading the way. Kuan and Harry left him alone.

The captain of the Blackshirts strode in next, and Kuan moved with the speed of a lightning storm, striking with an open hand and kicking with a bare heel. The captain hit the floor with his legs tangled, shouting in surprise. He fumbled at his belt for his weapon as the next two Blackshirts charged inside without their captive. Harry saw the albino crumpled on the floor outside where they'd left him, motionless.

"Take him down!" shouted the captain, unable to rise.

Harry could only stare as Kuan leaped into the air, white robe flailing, his bare heel striking one Blackshirt across the face, then the other. Their heads whipped to the side, and they stumbled backward, somehow able to stay on their feet.

It was all happening so fast. Harry stood there with the bottles in his hands, useless.

"Go!" Kuan urged the boy to leave while he could. But in so doing, he drew the attention of the downed captain.

"Stay right where you are, kid." The large bearded man aimed his handgun at Harry. "Drop those bottles. Now!"

Harry swallowed, his eyes fixed on the gun muzzle.

"The penthouse—on the double!" The SYN stood at the desk across the room, shouting at someone on a hologram projected upward from the glass surface. "What do you mean, you're too *busy*?"

Kuan brought down another Blackshirt who fell with a groan and lay still, out cold.

"I said *now*!" The captain discharged his weapon into the ceiling. It sounded like a bomb going off.

Harry jumped inside his skin at the explosion. His bottles dropped to the carpet. Kuan froze, his dark gaze focused on the gun as its muzzle returned to Harry. Silence held the moment, even as the cacophony of *Torment's* blood metal echoed faintly downstairs.

"That's better." The captain winced as he tried to pull his right leg up underneath him. It stubbornly refused to

cooperate. "What the hell did you *do* to me?"

Kuan said nothing. The Blackshirt who remained on his feet whipped out a charged prod and cursed, spitting blood aside. He jammed the end that sparked into the monk's chest. Kuan's shoulders caved in, and he jerked backward.

"The captain asked you a question, *holy man!*"

The bearded captain cursed, shaking his head. "Must be the night for monks gone wild. Full moon or something?"

The other Blackshirt snorted. "Must be." He advanced on Kuan with the prod, ready to re-administer its business end.

"What are you doing with this guy, kid?" said the captain.

Harry looked down at the bearded man, past the gun trained on him. There were no words in his head, none that he could think of.

"The mandroids are on their way." The SYN employee with the black face paint and piercings returned from the desk. "Allow me to apologize on behalf of Sir Gavin—"

"Where the hell is he?"

"As I told you downstairs—"

"Couldn't hear a damned thing down there." The captain grimaced, refusing to give in to his paralyzed leg. He massaged it with his free hand. "Tell Lennox we're here, like he requested. We've got the albino." He nodded toward the man curled on the floor outside. "If he wants to I.D. him, now would be the time."

"If he lasts that long," sneered the other Blackshirt.

"Mr. Lennox is...otherwise occupied at the moment." The SYN's way of saying he had no clue where Lennox was, no idea that Lennox could walk between worlds. Probably didn't even know that a different world existed.

The Blackshirt on the floor came to with a sudden curse, rising onto all fours and shaking his head sharply.

"Get up," the captain barked, even as he himself was unable to do so. "Bring the cop killer in here. Keep him in the

corner with the other one. Lennox must be starting a Wayist collection or something." The Blackshirt stumbled to his feet to do the captain's bidding. "Don't know how this one fits in, though. You some kind of monk-in-training, kid? There used to be a word for that. *Acolyte*, maybe? Can't remember."

Harry shook his head, strands of black hair falling to cover his right eye.

"Do you know why you're here?" The captain frowned, lowering his gun.

The synthetic employee quickly spoke up, "Mr. Lennox has business with them, both the monk and this boy."

"He's not being held against his will?" The frown remained intact as the captain looked Harry over, noticing the marks on his wrists where he'd been tied. Other than that, there wasn't a scratch on him. "What *business* would a high-roller like Lennox have with a kid?"

"I hope you are not implying—" the employee started.

"Hey, I'm just curious is all." The captain reached upward. "Here, give me a hand."

The SYN lent both hands to the captain who, after a few moments of grunting, grimacing, and cursing, managed to find his feet beneath him, as unsteady as they were. He kept the employee nearby to lean on and kept the gun down at his side. His concerned gaze never left Harry.

"My name's Captain Armstrong, kid. That guy—" He pointed with his gun at the white monk. "—killed my cousin tonight. One of the best local cops in this god-awful town. Run through like a damn shish kebab." He cursed foully. Then he apologized for the language. "What's your name?"

The Blackshirt brought the unconscious albino inside and dropped him onto the floor. His skin was whiter than Harry had ever seen, or ever thought humanly possible. He moaned upon impact, still unconscious. His face was swollen badly, even more battered than it had looked from a distance.

With a smirk, the Blackshirt brought his heavy boot down on the white man's crotch. Harry winced, cringing, expecting to hear the man's scream tear through the room. But he didn't make a sound. He just opened his eyes, black in stark contrast to his skin. Without any kind of expression on his face, he reached forward with both hands and gripped the Blackshirt's ankle, twisting it in a single movement. A sickening crunch, and the Blackshirt screamed, jerking back his boot and flailing against the wall.

"You've got a name?" Captain Armstrong didn't seem to notice what had just happened. Or if he did, then he didn't care.

"Harry." He stared at the white man who stared back, pale lips parted in surprise.

"And what sort of business do you have with Mr. Lennox, Harry?"

The boy blinked under the albino's direct gaze. *Does he recognize me? Why would he?*

"Damned *freak!*" The Blackshirt with the broken ankle jammed his prod into the white man's gut and held it there, leaning on it and cursing as he watched his victim writhe in agony.

Harry winced.

"You're not Lennox's supplier, are you?" The captain chuckled, oblivious again to what went on behind him.

"No." Harry swallowed. "He...killed my father, I think."

Cornered by the other prod-wielding Blackshirt, Kuan felt his insides sink at those words. *No, Harry. This is not the time, nor the place.*

"You *think?*" The captain frowned again. The synthetic employee grimaced, struggling beneath the full weight of the large man leaning on him. "I'd be one hundred percent sure before I went around making accusations like that, kid. Mr. Lennox is quite an influential man in this town." He

caught himself. "But maybe you're not from around here. Is that it?" He paused. "Where are you from, Harry?"

"NewCity," he said. The white man was unconscious now and curled up into a fetal position. The Blackshirt had removed the prod, leaving behind a hideous burn mark on the side of his robe. "Western Province, Alpha Sector."

The captain's head eased back as he watched the boy. His jaw muscle twitched beneath the beard. "Well, this is NewCity," he mused aloud. "But I've never heard of an *Alpha* Sector. This is Reeves' Province. You know who Joe Reeves is, right?"

Kuan closed his eyes and prayed the boy would not answer.

"*Praying*, holy man?" sneered the Blackshirt in front of him.

Kuan ignored him.

"You better pray hard." He jammed the prod into the monk's groin, causing him to double over with a groan. "Get on your knees! I might not be as holy as you, but I know a thing or two about prayer. My mother tried raising me in the Way, and from what I remember, prayers are to be done while you're *kneeling*." He jabbed with the prod again and laughed out loud.

*Holy Father, forgive him.* Grimacing, Kuan fell to the floor.

"He's the mayor, right?" Harry watched as Kuan was driven to his knees by the sadistic Blackshirt. "Mayor Reeves."

*Why are they doing this? Don't they have any respect? These holy men are unarmed!*

The captain snorted. "Wrong again, kid. Damn! Are you from another planet or something?" He chuckled dryly. "Joe Reeves is the governor, and my boss's boss. The Province is named after him." He spoke slowly now, as he might to any hopped-up addict. "Is there something wrong with your

head, maybe?" He tapped his own temple with the gun muzzle. "Everything all right in there?"

No. It wasn't.

A crescendo of high-pitched ringing blared between his ears, and a dull ache had sharpened into a pain he could no longer withstand. He struggled to remain in the moment, to remain attentive to the Blackshirt captain standing over him, to notice what was happening to Kuan in the far corner, what was happening to the white man on the floor. Harry fought to remain conscious, even as his eyes rolled backward in their sockets and he collapsed to the floor, much to the surprise of both Captain Armstrong and the SYN under his arm. Blood dribbled black from each of the boy's ears.

He did not see or hear the three intruders as they barged in downstairs—one stoop-shouldered old man, one tall young woman, one muscular, sword-wielding man. The mayhem they created immediately upon entering The Pit was enough to make *Torment* stop their onstage antics and stare in utter dismay.



## THIRTEEN

Muldoon was aware of one thing outside his body: rain. It pummeled the shoulders of his long coat, drumming a cold, soggy rhythm into his frame. Soaked to the skin, shivering, he stood rooted to the sidewalk, facing the brick façade of a building he didn't recognize. With one hand, he braced himself against it, his head down, eyes closed. A faucet stream drained from the brim of his hat, but he paid it no attention.

His mind was elsewhere, his thoughts stretched across time, pulled so far in both directions that they wore thin, tearing across the middle. It took what mental fortitude he still possessed to keep from falling through a hole and losing himself altogether.

The darkness was coming. He could feel it. The cold despair, the nausea gnawing at his gut. He would be lost. He couldn't fight it, not this time. He didn't have the strength.

But he had to. For the boy's sake, if nothing else. The confusion and depression could take him later. Not now. He had one more good deed left in him.

There was nothing else that mattered. Not the autos splashing by, not the police who would be searching for him soon. Not even the man behind him, stepping out of the shadows and into the frosty glow of the streetlight.

"You plan on standing here long?"

Muldoon spun on his heel and grabbed for his gun, unable to remember if there were any pulse rounds left in the chambers.

The old man—the boy's father, back from the dead—held up both hands. "Hey, watch it! Don't you point that thing at me, buddy. I'm here to help you, for crying out

loud!" He chuckled. "Assuming you want my help, that is. If, on the other hand, you're one of those tough guys who thinks he can do everything on his own, then I can save us both some trouble and get the hell out of here right now. Let the cops take you and charge you with what? Murder? Kidnapping? Reckless endangerment of SYNCorp's artificial consumers at The Pearl? Yeah, I'm pretty sure they'd throw the whole damn book at you, pal."

Muldoon swallowed, blinking to clear his vision. His stance was unsteady, but his grip on the gun was sure. "I saw you die," he said.

"Really? What was that like?"

"You tell me. You were there."

The older man shrugged, scratching at the grizzled stubble on his jaw. "You must have me confused with somebody else. Believe me, it happens. With all this traveling across time and reality, it's a wonder we can keep anybody straight! Am I right?" He grinned, but then his expression fell. A false front crashing to the street. "We should really get out of the open. I wasn't kidding about the cops. They're just minutes away from issuing a Province-wide manhunt with your name in lights. You got a place we could go, talk things over a bit?"

"I don't know who you are."

"Yes you do. Things have just gotten a bit messy upstairs." He tapped his left temple. "Trust me, I've been there. But right now, at this point in time—this *when*—you've got to get out of the rain, and we've got to talk. I don't know how else to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"What I've got to tell you."

Muldoon stared at the earnest look in the man's eyes. *I saw you die*. Pulled apart like a piece of meat by two mandroids. But that wasn't the only time he'd seen this man. *I saw you disappear, vanish into the air in that hallway*. A hazy grey and white image on that vidscreen. And

somehow, deep down, Muldoon knew he'd seen him before that, known him long before his murder in that alley. Same as the kid. Something about them was so familiar. *I know you, old man...*

Muldoon holstered his gun and tugged at the drenched lapels of his coat. "You got a name?"

The man thrust out his thick, gnarled hand with a toothy grin. "Cyrus Horton. Believe it or not, we're already well-acquainted, Harry."

Muldoon faltered as the old man's hand clamped down with a firm grip. "You know me."

"Of course I do. You're Harold Muldoon, the private investigator. Or, at least you used to be. Among other things." He chuckled. "One in particular, of a very particular and special interest to me." His eyes burned with intensity. "The *BackTracker*."

Muldoon frowned. He pulled his hand free. "I don't know what you think—"

"No matter, no matter. Perhaps I've rushed things a bit, diving in too deep too soon, as the case may be. Forgive me. I can be a real impulsive fool at times. Just forget I said anything."

An auto veered too close to the curb and righted itself, but not before it sent a murky puddle splashing across the sidewalk, chilling the already soaked shoes of the two men. Muldoon watched the vehicle speed away around the headless mandroid in the middle of the street. A road hazard, standing there like that.

"Shall we?" Horton gestured with an outstretched arm as if he already knew where they would go.

Muldoon shook his head. "I can't go home."

*That's the first place they'll look for me.* Why were the police after him? Could he remember the details? Of course he could. He just had to focus on the here and now, the recent past. *I grabbed that monk—Yeng-something—at The Pearl. Caused quite a scene.* That would do it.

"There's nowhere else?"

Muldoon remembered a little girl with dark eyes and black fingernails. He remembered her parents. Zombies, both of them. He remembered her bouncing rubber ball.

*Thump, rebound, caught. Pause. "You messed me up."*

Not a recent memory. It had that faded feeling like so many others drifting through his mind, leaves on the wind, impossible to grasp. From how long ago? Is that why she opened the door to her apartment and let him inside, let him scroll back the vidfiles on the screen beside her doorframe while she watched him with those sagging eyes, not saying a single word? *She recognized me?*

He turned away and headed up the vacant sidewalk against the pouring rain. "There might be one place we can go."

Horton brought his hands together with a clap before stuffing them into the pockets of his heavy coat. "Excellent!" He hastened to follow.

They moved in a single file of sorts, Muldoon leading the way with Horton close behind, both with their heads down, hats tugged low against the driving rain and wind, coats flapping behind them. Their shoes sloshed through inescapable puddles that would have reflected the moonlight if left undisturbed by the bombarding rain. Vehicles passed at random intervals with lights flashing and horns blaring until Muldoon turned down a side street and crossed one block of imposing tenements followed by another, then another.

Here it was quiet, save for the ferocious storm. For now, they were alone. The streetlights gradually dimmed to nothing. Snatches of moonlight between the clouds were enough to illuminate the way, but shadows threatened to overtake any passerby.

Muldoon's eyes roved as he walked. It was habit. He knew what to expect. He knew what lurked in these shadows.

In another life, he might have been born here.

Eventually, this part of town would be torn down to make way for luxury apartments, funded by the owner of The Pearl. It would be touted as a new age for the heart of the city, a reconstruction of the civic spirit. The ever-present undesirables would be pushed outward, as far away as possible from the ones who really mattered—those with expendable lines of credit. City officials would turn a blind eye as deals were struck behind closed doors by people of influence, but the end would justify the means: the city would flourish, becoming the Provinces' pride and joy, attracting humans and synthetics alike from all over. And in the process, the owner of The Pearl, Gavin Lennox, would triple his fortune. Not to mention his prestige.

But for now, it was as it had always been: the outskirts, the other side of the tracks, the area you avoided at night. Locals called it HellTown.

Muldoon stumbled.

"What is it?" Horton asked, leaning forward.

"I've been here before." He brought a hand to his forehead, squeezed his temples with a wince.

"Well, I'd hope so!" Horton chuckled. "You live around here, don't you?"

*I've been here—this moment, this exact moment—before. With the boy, out cold, slung over my shoulder. I carried him this way. Hours ago? Days? It seemed like years, if that was possible. Maybe so. Time was slipping beyond his grasp.*

Horton frowned up at Muldoon. "Déjà vu, you mean."

"Yeah."

Horton nodded to himself. "I was afraid of that. Happens a lot, does it?"

"Every now and then." Muldoon released his forehead and blinked against the rain. He glanced at Horton. "Next block up." He forged ahead.

"Any headaches?" The old man trailed behind.

"What?" Muldoon didn't look back.

"You've got headaches too, right? Bad bouts of vertigo at times?"

Muldoon frowned. *Who is he, really? How does he know so much?* "Only at the opera."

Horton chuckled. "Funny man."

"I try."

"So where exactly are we going?" There was nothing but curiosity in the old man's tone. "Not to your apartment, unless you have a death wish and plan to take on the cops all by yourself, go out in a blaze of glory. Though I wouldn't put that past you. It's been you versus the world for a while now, hasn't it?"

Muldoon didn't reply.

Horton cleared his throat. "How long has it been, Harry?" He waited for a response of some kind. "How long have you been without her?"

Muldoon reeled. His hand shot out, gripping the old man's throat and hefting him up onto his toes.

"I don't know who you are, or what you think you know about me," Muldoon grated out through his teeth. "But you're wrong. You don't know me. I don't know you." *Yes I do—somehow.* "So just shut the hell up until we get to where we're going. Once we're there, I'll be the one asking the questions. Got it?"

The old man gulped, choked out, "Yeah. Yeah." His head jerked in the affirmative.

Muldoon released him with a shove and strode away, straight for the glassed-in entrance of Tenement 3166.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Horton rasped, rubbing his neck.

The door didn't move aside at the first sign of their presence; it ignored them instead. But with a familiar ease, Muldoon shoved it open and held it for Horton. The old man followed close behind, eyes darting. Every aspect of the dilapidated foyer seemed to be of interest to him, from the

cracked plastiglass to the multitudinous layers of graffiti. The stairwell door hung open.

Inside, the jittery light was cold and grim. The two men's sloppy footsteps on the stairs echoed, leaving a wet trail of prints. Eight flights up without a word between them, until Muldoon reached another lopsided door and stepped out into the silent hallway beyond.

"Your floor?" Horton said.

Muldoon didn't look back. He veered to the left instead of going straight up the hall to his own unit, 806. His eyes scanned the numbers on the doors he passed, one at a time. *899, 898, 897*. How long had it been? He'd run down here, gun drawn, chasing that phantom of a man—who now followed him in the flesh.

The floor. There had been wet shoe prints, nothing else. Hours ago? Weeks? *He vanished into the air*. Now there were two sets of prints—left behind both men. Easy to track, once the police arrived.

Muldoon's pace slowed. He paused outside a door like every other in this long, nondescript hallway.

"Your unit?" Horton whispered. "You've got balls, I'll give you that. You're actually going to wait here for the cops to show up. Crazy! But kind of cool, at the same time. Brazen and intrepid. Definitely intrepid. I don't often have an opportunity to use that word. So many left unsaid, you know? Remember dictionaries? I'm babbling. Sorry."

Muldoon curled his fingers into a fist, which he raised toward the door instead of the old man. *Unit 893*. He'd been there once before—that much he remembered. Was it earlier tonight? *The longest night of my life*. But there was another memory at the same time, the one with a rubber ball bouncing in the hall. Which moment had taken place first? *The chicken or the egg?*

"So you don't live here," Horton observed as Muldoon knocked. "You know someone here—a friend, yes?"

"Not really."

"A lover?"

Muldoon ignored him. The alternative—knocking the old fool to the floor—could have drawn unwanted attention.

The door clicked open and slid deliberately to the side. A foul reek wafted out from the darkness within.

"Aw, that's nasty." Horton covered his nose and mouth with one hand. "What the hell died in there—after crapping itself royally?"

"After you." Muldoon stood aside.

Horton looked aghast. "We're not going *in* there, are we?"

"If it's all right with her."

"Who?"

Muldoon nodded toward the open door.

Horton jumped back a step at the sight of the small apparition staring up at him. "Well, hello there..." he trailed off, swallowing nervously.

The girl's eyes sagged unblinking behind the tangled mess of her hair. She didn't say a word. Muldoon knelt down to her eye level. She noticed his movement and turned her vacant gaze upon him.

"Hey. Remember me?" He waited for a response of some kind. There was none, not even a glint of recognition in her eye. *And yet—she opened the door to us, and with less hesitation this time.* "I needed to use your vidcam earlier. I was looking for someone."

"Speaking of which..." Horton glanced at the lenses mounted above the doors around them. "Ready for your close-up?"

Muldoon focused on the girl before him. "My...friend and I need a place to talk, someplace safe." He didn't want to frighten her, even as he wondered if there was anything that could. "Can we step inside for a little while?"

She fixed him with a silent stare.

"Parents brought her up right, and that's a fact. No talking to strangers." Horton wiped at his nose. "Kind of



sucks for us, though. You sure there's nowhere else you can go?"

*Shut up, old man.* Muldoon clenched his jaw, bit his tongue. Whatever it took to hold himself in check.

The girl turned away, dissolving into the darkness inside. Leaving the front door open.

"I guess we have our answer," Horton quipped.

Muldoon rose and entered the unit without a glance back. Horton cursed under his breath, shaking his head. Then he shrugged and leaned away, taking a deep breath and holding it, cheeks bulging, before he followed Muldoon inside. The door slid shut on his heels, and he was enfolded in the fetid darkness. Jerking against his own gag reflex, he kept a hand to his face.

"Breathe shallow." Muldoon took the old man's elbow and guided him across the littered floor of the living room, past the couch where the zombie parents sat staring into space, twitching at untimed intervals. Oblivious to any reality outside the Link. "This way."

"Can you see?" Horton's voice was muffled.

"No."

"Where are we going?"

"Bathroom." Muldoon carried a fairly accurate map of the unit in his mind's eye. The floor plan was identical to his own, the same as every other single-bedroom, single-bathroom unit in the building. Their destination lay at the end of a short hallway on the right.

"Where's the girl?" Horton blinked repeatedly, as if it would cure his blindness.

"Watching us."

"How do you know her?"

*I don't.* Muldoon reached out, felt along the wall for the doorframe.

"Here." He pulled Horton forward and pushed him stumbling inside.

The ceiling globe came to life, sensing their presence, and with it a rickety ventilation fan kicked on. Horton cowered under the sudden glare, wincing. Muldoon kept his eyes on the black and white checkered floor tiles as he slid the door shut behind them. It was close quarters, enough room for only one to stand in front of the cracked sink between the toilet and the shower stall, rimmed with black mold. Exposed pipes dripped tepidly.

"Sit." Muldoon nudged the old man against the toilet.

"Right." Horton faltered, bumping against the sink and the man beside him, until he came to rest on the cracked toilet seat.

Muldoon leaned against the crusty shower door and folded his arms across his chest. He fixed the old man before him with a direct stare. Horton blinked and sniffed once, twice. Shrugged with half a grin.

"Well, at least the air's better in here," he said.

Muldoon pointed upward. "Fan."

"Right. Good idea." Horton chuckled. "Don't know how they can live like this. That stench out there. Holy crap!" He caught himself. "Well, maybe not so holy."

"Talk." Muldoon was in no mood for brainless chatter.

Horton nodded. "That's why we're here, right? But I've got to ask: Why *here*? Your own building, I mean? Don't you have anywhere else? Don't you know anybody else?" He paused. "They're going to find you. It's only a matter of time. You realize that, right? Not just the city cops. We're talking Federal police here. Blackshirts. Lennox has connections in high places, and you just shot up his joint, but big." He paused. "Translation: you're in some pretty deep doo-doo."

*Tell me something I don't know.*

"Talk." Muldoon contemplated killing the old man and leaving him there to rot along with everything else. *But the girl...* She didn't deserve that. She didn't deserve any part of this life.

"Straight to the point? Of course. Well, here it is, without further ado: I made a mistake." Horton's gaze dropped, and he stared at the checkered floor for a moment. "That about sums it up. And now everything's gone to hell. At first, I thought it was all my fault, that I'd somehow managed to unravel everything—unintentionally, of course, but that's little excuse. The damage was done, and I thought for sure I was the culprit. But that wasn't the case, not all of it." He shook his head fiercely. "Took a lot of doing, believe me, but I managed to fix everything. I wiped away every single fingerprint at the scene of the crime, so to speak, all that I might have left behind—left everything the way it was, undisturbed, the way God intended. No trace of my meddling with things in the past." He bit his lip. "But the resultants remained."

"Am I supposed to understand any of that?"

"Sorry." He looked up. "I'm dumbing this down as much as I can."

"Try explaining this: How'd you manage your vanishing act? Right outside this unit earlier tonight." That timeframe sounded right, but he wasn't sure.

Horton opened his mouth to reply but tucked his tongue into his cheek and winced instead. "You saw that, huh?"

Muldoon nodded.

"Those damn cameras over everybody's door. An invasion of privacy, that's what they are. My alternate should have known better. They used us—both of us, you know. Took all our brilliant ideas and implemented them without our input. Used us up and spit us out. That's the government for you, regardless of the reality."

Muldoon clenched his jaw. His patience was waning. "Talk sense, old man."

Horton chuckled. "Sense. Right. Sometimes I get on a roll, and there's no stopping me. I'm not often afforded the

opportunity to share in human-to-human conversation, you see."

*Not surprising.*

"So, you thought you saw me disappear—"

"I saw it happen," Muldoon said.

"I'm sure that's what it looked like. But in actuality, I didn't vanish into thin air. I merely crossed over into another world, parallel to this one."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Familiar with brane cosmology? The multiverse? No? I suppose not. Well, you probably won't like this—it won't sound like *sense* to you. But the fact of the matter is...I don't belong here." He paused, peering up at Muldoon. "I'm only visiting, you see. Doing my homework, as it were, connecting the dots to the best of my ability. But I'm not from your reality. I'm just a—" He thought for a moment. "I'm what you might call a *transient*."

Muldoon frowned. *Is he out of his mind?* More than likely. But the facts hadn't changed. *I saw him die. I saw him vanish—cross over—whatever.*

"I saw you get torn apart. Nobody comes back from that."

"I believe you. But you have to understand something, as crazy as it sounds. As much as it flies in the face of your memory: That wasn't me." Horton shook his head. "It might have been my alternate, but it wasn't me. Obviously, right? I mean, I'm sitting right here!" He laughed out loud.

"Your alternate."

"That's right. The version of me tied to this reality. He was born here, and he's lived here his entire life. Until tonight, that is—from the sound of things. Met an untimely demise, did he? Poor devil."

"He had a kid," Muldoon said. "A boy."

"Really? At his age?" Another chuckle. "Well, I wouldn't put it past me—*him*, I mean. We're a virile lot, we Hortons!"

He sobered at length. "I have a daughter, myself." He watched Muldoon.

"You said you made a mistake."

"Yes. I may have killed the wrong man."

Muldoon didn't flinch. "Really."

"I'm afraid so. Had him killed, truth be told. Sent a well-trained assassin, programmed—"

"Someone else did your dirty work."

"Isn't that the way? All men with power, you know. It corrupts absolutely. Something like that."

"Who was he? This man you killed."

Horton inhaled deeply. "He was a detective. Like you."

"That was a long time ago." Muldoon sniffed, shifted his weight. "I'm retired now."

*You don't know me, old man.*

"Right. My mistake. So anyway, he managed to get his hands on one of my inventions. Did I happen to mention I'm an inventor?" he grinned, proud of himself.

Muldoon released a yawn.

"Well, he got hold of a BackTracker and started using it in his line of work. You know, going back through time to solve missing persons cases and the like. Earned himself quite a reputation in the process. Cases solved 100% of the time, if you can believe."

"Time travel."

"Temporal *displacement*, actually. Apples and oranges, I suppose. They're all fruit!" He chuckled, shoulders rocking.

"Oh but you see, I'd already done the same kind of thing. You know, the going back through time, again and again, trying to make the world a better place, one person at a time. That hero complex crap. I even tried to keep the Plague from ever happening, if you can believe!"

"You failed."

"Some things can't be changed. It's almost like they've got minds of their own. But that didn't stop me from trying." He looked pensive. "Far too many times."

Muldoon narrowed his gaze. "What went wrong?"

"Everything." Horton raised his eyebrows with a weak smile. "I didn't realize what I was doing. With every trip back, I was unraveling the timeline, sending it in new directions, creating realities that never would have existed, otherwise." He paused. "I'm afraid I may be losing you."

Muldoon shrugged.

"Okay. Think of it like this. You've got a cord—three strands twined together to form a single length of rope. Yes? The cord runs from the past to the present like a timeline of sorts. Everything's peachy, the way God intended. But then this certain genius gets it into his head to start fiddling with the limits of time and space, and he invents a way to punch a stable wormhole through quantum foam and go back in time. We're talking cutting edge nanotechnology here, harvesting the power of negative energy to capture, enlarge, and hold that tunnel through space-time open long enough for someone to pass through. Are you with me?" He stared, unblinking, hands frozen mid-gesture. "I mean, so far?"

"Sure." Muldoon was standing in a cramped bathroom for one reason: answers. He'd seen this man come back from the dead only to vanish on that vidscreen footage. *If he was any other garden-variety lunatic, I never would have given him the time of day.*

"Good, good. So you've gone back to the past, maybe even to your own past. Backtracked your timeline, right? You decide to change something for your younger self, maybe something seemingly insignificant, but it's changed—you've changed it—"

"I get it."

"Sorry. Broken record syndrome." He chuckled. "So you return to your own time—that's the beauty of the BackTracker device: it won't abandon you in the past as long as you're wearing it. You return, and life isn't the way you left it. That little alteration you made, it didn't seem like much, but it's already changed life as you know it. Because

this isn't the life you knew. Not anymore. The changes you've made in the past have created an entirely different *reality*." His eyes bulged as he leaned forward. "That's the real kicker. You didn't just change the past and, in so doing, create a new future for yourself and everybody else in the world. No, you did all that and more. You've created a separate, concurrent reality running parallel to your own!"

Muldoon blinked. "So that rope..."

"It's become unraveled. You see? Two strands now, running side by side from the past clear through to the present. Only you're no longer part of the world you left. You've jumped over to this new strand, thanks to your meddling with the past. The same timeline, only one's the way it was before, and the second has diverged from its original course, the result of a fool and his BackTracker fiddling with events in the past, creating a reality that never would have existed otherwise!"

Muldoon nodded. "So when I saw you disappear, you were crossing over to that other...*reality*?"

"Yes!" Horton clapped his hands and grinned. "By Jove, I think he's—"

"And that's possible?"

"Of course it is." Horton reached into his coat.

Muldoon's hand went for his holster.

"Hey now, trigger-happy much?" Horton retrieved a silver cigarette lighter and chucked it in his palm. "Care for a smoke?"

"I've got enough charges against me for one night, thanks."

Horton shrugged. "Perfectly legal in the world I hail from. Along with a whole lot of other debaucheries, I'm afraid."

"The Way's not as popular over there?"

"Most true believers have been driven Underground—by choice or necessity. There are still a few Way-followers

around on the surface, but they in no way have garnered the respect yours have here, despite their humanitarian efforts."

"In this *reality*."

"Your reality. This version of NewCity, where Joseph Reeves is merely the mayor."

Muldoon raised an eyebrow.

"Where I'm from, he's the governor." Horton cursed. "A real fascist son-of-a-bitch, I must say."

Muldoon recalled his recent interaction with the bumbling mayor at The Pearl. Hard to imagine him as a dictator. "Somehow I can't see it."

"We've got a whole different world over there, Harry." The old man's eyes glistened. "It's really bad, and it's not getting any better." He squeezed the lighter, flipped off the cap, and the flame sprang upward. "Want to see for yourself?" He stared into the flame for a moment before returning his gaze to Muldoon.

"Got some kind of portal nearby?" he scoffed. But then he remembered something from that footage, when the old man had disappeared: the air rippling like water in front of him.

"Right here." Horton raised the lighter. "The energy I've managed to harness inside this device is enough to trigger breaches in the membrane between worlds. Open 'em up, and walk on through to the other side!"

"You're out of your mind." The analogy of the cord, the strands of reality, made sense in a way—hypothetically. Muldoon could wrap what remained of his mind around a scientific theory. But this? A cigarette lighter that could take him to a parallel world?

"You don't believe it? Fine. See for yourself."

"Not interested."

Those monks had stashed the boy somewhere. Muldoon had a feeling the kid's time was running out. *Find him, reunite him with his father.* But wasn't *this* the boy's father?



"What have you got to lose?" Horton stood, knees knocking against Muldoon's. "Just look into the light, and in a moment we'll find ourselves in another world!"

Muldoon reached for the door. He'd had enough.

"What are you doing?" Horton frowned behind the flickering flame.

"Leaving." He shoved the door open and stepped into the foul, humid darkness of the living room.

"Harry, I'm trying to help you." Horton scurried to follow. The light in the bathroom switched off automatically, but the flicker of the lighter cast an eerie glow about them. "You've got the cops after you, there's nowhere you can go—you told me that yourself. Why not take a little trip with me and see? It's all true, everything I've told you!"

Once upon a time, a manila envelope had held a wristwatch and a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with letters circled seemingly at random. Weird. Really weird. But the letters formed words, which coalesced into sentences and paragraphs in an operation manual of sorts. In a few hours' time, Muldoon had learned all he needed in order to use that terrible device packaged innocuously in black plastic. *The BackTracker*.

The memories were fleeting and fuzzy, but they were there, ensconced in part of his mind. That package had been sent to him by Cyrus Horton. This old man—or one like him, if what he said about other worlds was true. The wristwatch had worked. Of that much he was certain. It's what had turned his mind inside out, made him the messed-up wreck he was today.

*Is this any different? A cigarette lighter able to transport you to a different reality?* Muldoon stopped in the middle of the living room. *Who am I to be skeptical? Me, of all people?*

Authoritative voices and loud, thumping footfalls echoed outside in the hall. Muldoon turned back to Horton,

the crags of his face lit up in bright relief against the lighter's flame.

"You can't let them take you, Harry. If they do, he'll have you. It's *you* he wants!"

Muldoon frowned. What was he babbling about now? "Who?"

"Lennox. He's got one of these already." Horton licked his lips and blinked as he waved the lighter around. "I don't know how the hell he got his hands on it, I haven't been able to piece that together yet. Maybe you can help me? You're—you *were* a detective, after all. And a damn good one. He's got two NewCities to plunder now, and all he needs is the BackTracker to make himself a god among humankind!"

"What's that got to do with me?"

"We can't let him have it, Harry. Lennox is a power-hungry psycho, and God only knows what he'll do to change the past. He'll start the mess all over again, don't you see? Unraveling the timeline and creating new realities all over the place! Who knows what things might follow him through a breach? You don't know about the freaks we have Underground—you don't have them here, thank God. They're just one example, from a reality where human society degenerated into chaos. They followed me through a breach, dozens of them, before I managed to collapse their world. Can you imagine what other monsters may be out there? What a man like Lennox could do to screw us over royally? Creating realities that should never exist?"

A knock pounded against the door. "Open up. Police."

Muldoon bumped into a frail figure in the dark. The little girl. She didn't make a sound. He crouched down to her eye level and looked into her pale face, basked in the faint glow of Horton's lighter.

"You need to open this door," he told her. "They won't hurt you."

An unconscious groan, low and guttural, came from the couch. The girl's mother. Eyes vacant, mouth gaping open.

Horton cursed at the sight.

"Do you understand?" Muldoon gazed into the girl's eyes, uncertain whether she was aware of his presence.

"They have to see you. You have to let them in."

"What are you doing, Harry?" Horton whispered.

"I can't leave her like this." Alone.

"You think they'll help her? *Cops?*" the old man scoffed.

*I knew a good one, once.* Armstrong was his name. He was sure of it.

Muldoon glanced at the door. Another knock. They wouldn't stay out there all night, and they wouldn't bust down the door. Soon they would lose interest, move on to the next unit, figure there were nothing but zombies inside. Linked up and dead to the real world.

*There's someone in here who can't live like this. Not anymore.*

Muldoon strode toward the door.

"You're not—?" Horton hissed incredulously.

Muldoon pressed his palm against the sensor grate.

The door to unit 893 slid open. Two officers outside, clad in body armor and carrying automatic rifles—standard fare for any trip into HellTown—turned sharply with muzzles trained, laser sights burning white pinpoints of light through the darkness.

"Who's there?" one of them barked.

Silence. Boot soles squeaked against wet tiles.

"Anybody there?"

They stared into the dark cave beyond the open door frame. One of them ventured forward and leaned inside, making the mistake of drawing breath. He fell back with a curse.

"Something died in there."

"Somebody opened that door," his partner replied.

Small fingers, grey with unkempt black nails, curled around the doorframe.

"What the hell?" Rifles clinked, drawn close, fingers curled around triggers.

A girl stepped out into the light and stood off-center before them. Matted black hair hid most of her pallid features. She didn't make a sound.

"Stand down," said the first officer, and both of them lowered their weapons. Careful not to startle the girl, he dropped to one knee before her. He hesitated as he looked her over, glancing into the rank darkness beyond. "You okay, kiddo?"

"You alone here?" asked the other cop. He peered inside, holding his breath. With a click, a light came on, shining forth from his rifle like a spotlight. It spread across two zombies twitching on the couch. The kid's parents, at one point in time. "Guess not," he muttered with a wince.

The girl's throat constricted. She cleared it softly. Then she spoke: "I remember him." Her chapped lips twitched into what could have been a smile. "From a dream..."

As soon as Muldoon had pressed his hand against the sensor grate, he turned back to Horton and his lighter, stared into the flame, felt his insides swim against the confines of his flesh and bones as the air beside them undulated like a vertical pool of water. He heard the old man say something, but it was garbled and slow, as was his arm, reaching to nudge Muldoon into the rippling singularity.

Then everything was cold and silent, black and still. Freezing cold.

"You okay, Harry?" Cyrus Horton's voice came from across the room. "Breathe, remember to breathe. Makes your first time more tolerable. And rub your chest, get your blood moving, warm yourself up the best you can. Wormholes aren't the most tropical of destinations. Good thing we don't spend too long passing through. The blood would freeze in our veins!"

"We're—" Muldoon shivered, blinking in the darkness.  
"We crossed over?"

Horton chuckled. "Yep. You're in my world now, son."

"Where are we?"

"Let's take a look." Horton flipped the cap off the lighter, and the light of its flame danced against four dingy walls of an empty room. "Unit 893, I'd say. Same building, different reality."

The unit was unoccupied, stripped bare, floor to ceiling. Stuff. But it didn't smell nearly as bad as before.

"So when you cross over, you don't really go anywhere." Muldoon frowned. "I mean—"

"You stay put, as far as location. That's right. But the reality around you changes. Similar to the BackTracker—but with temporal displacement, it's the same *where*, different *when*." Another chuckle from the old man, echoing in the vacant room. "Quite a trip, huh?"

Muldoon paused to listen, his ear turned toward the door and the hallway outside.

"No cops. They're not looking for you here. In this world, you're-uh..." Horton's jovial expression wavered.

"There's another one of me here?"

"Well, there *was*." Horton cleared his throat. "Twenty years ago, I mean."

"You knew him."

"I sure did."

Muldoon paused. "What was he like?"

Horton's expression quivered in the flame. "He was a good man."

"What happened to him?"

Horton stared into the flame. He seemed hypnotized by it. "He died, Harry," he said at length. "He was murdered."

Muldoon didn't know how to respond. *Somebody killed me here, in this reality*. It was a strange feeling that swelled within him. Grief? Relief? *It wasn't me—not really*. Where had he been, two decades ago?

He thought back, sifting through memories that threatened to slip away beyond his grasp. He remembered being a private investigator, that he knew with certainty. Working out of an office in the Hancock Building downtown, he'd been young and brash, leading a double life to make ends meet. Working with elements of the city's underbelly as a middle man, locating items of scarcity. Years before he met Irena.

His heart lurched.

*Is she alive here?* Was it possible?

"I feel bad saying this, but maybe it's all for the best. I mean, if you were to meet your alternate, who knows what might happen?" Horton laughed. "The space-time continuum could implode! Or something less melodramatic."

"Then it's possible," Muldoon began, his eyes darting as his thoughts took form, "for someone to be gone, deceased in one reality, and alive and well in the other?"

Horton nodded. "Yes, it's quite probable. But why do you ask, Harry?"

Muldoon looked away. He couldn't speak the thoughts that whirled through his mind. They were too private, and he was afraid his eyes would betray him if he said her name aloud. He refused to shed a tear in front of this strange old man.

"So both of our *alternates* are dead. We have something in common." Muldoon glanced at the sensor grate beside the door. Despite the derelict nature of this apartment, the grate glowed faintly. They would be able to open the door and get out of here. "I saw yours murdered by mandroids outside The Pearl."

"Lennox must have thought my alternate created the BackTracker."

Muldoon frowned. "He didn't?"

Horton shrugged with half a smile. "Beats me. It's a full-time job keeping track of myself, Harry. I can't be my alternate's keeper!"

"How many of these *realities* are there?"

The old man raised his eyebrows. "So, you believe me now?"

"Seeing is believing."

"Then where does faith come in?"

"I don't follow the Way," Muldoon said.

Horton chuckled. "Obviously not. Well, to answer your question: At one time there were multiple realities. A real multiverse. They were sprouting up everywhere, due in large part to my ill-conceived crusades into the past to right the wrongs of the world. I was the inaugural BackTracker, so to speak. But once I learned the error of my ways, I spent years making everything right again, undoing what I had done by collapsing every alternate reality at the source of its divergence from the original strand." He paused. "Then *he* came along."

"The man you killed." Muldoon watched him. "The wrong one, you said."

Horton hesitated. "Yes. That's right." He cleared his throat. "He began his own crusades through time, righting the wrongs of his own generation, and in so doing, he unwittingly created a fresh plethora of alternate realities."

"So there's what, thousands of them now?"

Horton shook his head. "Not so much."

"What happened to the others?"

"They were collapsed by my younger self. He sent one of my children back through time to take care of it, to nip it in the bud, so to speak." His eyes brightened. "You haven't met my children yet, have you, Harry?"

"No, I—"

"Well, you will. And who knows, you might even meet my younger self—but I'd avoid it, if I were you. I don't know how he'd react if he were to see you again in the flesh!" He laughed out loud.

"Your *younger* self?"

"Of course." He paused. "I'm sorry, I haven't made myself clear. This is my reality, of course, but it's not exactly my *time*." He grinned sheepishly. "I'm from a few years down the road. Had to come back to set my younger self straight. The person he should have terminated was Gavin Lennox. A real Schrödinger's cat, that guy—both alive and dead! It's been Lennox all along who's kept the breaches open, tunneling through the membrane willy-nilly. Stretching the fabric of reality between worlds until it's close to the breaking point."

Muldoon took a step toward the door. *I can't stay here listening to this. Not when she could be out there. Somewhere.*

Irena.

"I should have seen it sooner—he should have, my younger self," Horton continued. "But he had his blinders on. I have a tendency to do that, sometimes. Tunnel vision syndrome, I suppose. Regardless, Lennox has gotten to be one of the most powerful men in both realities, yours and mine. He's incredibly dangerous."

Muldoon turned and reached out with the open palm of his hand. The steel grate beside the door met his fingertips.

"He killed his own alternate. Can you believe it? What kind of a man would it take to do something like that? To look into the eyes of a face identical to your own, to know you're looking at yourself, and to *kill* that person, that *you*." Horton shuddered. "Gives me the chills, just thinking about it. Would it be murder or suicide? Chew on that for a while."

The momentary glow of the sensor grate showed through Muldoon's squared fingernails. The door clicked open, and he shoved it the rest of the way.

"Hey, where are you going?" Horton shuffled after him.

Muldoon was already out in the hallway, heading for the stairwell under the flickering throes of cracked and battered light tubes. He knew this building well enough, regardless of the reality. What he would find outside, he had no idea. But



he would welcome it. Anything was better than hearing more of the old man's ravings.

"Wait up!" Horton called after him. "You'll need a guide, you know. This isn't your world!"

Muldoon didn't slow his pace. Gone from his mind were thoughts of time travel or kidnappers disguised as monks or even the boy for whom he'd so desperately searched. Now there was only one image...one beautiful face with skin softer than silk, eyes closed with long, black lashes, her back rising and falling gently with each breath. Irena as he remembered seeing her last, sound asleep in their bed.

When he'd left her early that morning.

*Why did I go? How could I leave you without a word?*

For that damned package. From Cyrus Horton.

*Your father.*

Memories flooded his mind then, clear and true, and for the first time in more years than he could count, he knew they were real.

All of them.

## FOURTEEN

*Twenty Years Ago*

Alpha Geminorum Labs jutted up from the street like an imposing fortress of concrete and mirrors, greeting Irena dourly as she slowed the coupe to a humming stop less than a block away. This was as close as she could get. The two guards at the security station would have it no other way.

"Park or idle?" droned the computer console.

Irena averted her gaze from the direct stare of one of the guards, the one who, with a word to his comrade, sauntered straight for Muldoon's *Paradox*.

"Oscar—park." She fumbled with the safety harness.

The hard soles of the guard's boots approached.

"There does not appear to be a parking structure on this side of the security gate. Accessing other options," replied the computer.

"You do that," she muttered.

The guard's knuckles rapped twice on her window. She looked up, doing her best not to wilt under his over-confident look. He gestured for her to roll down the window.

"Oscar—window down," she gave the voice command.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" The guard leaned in as the tinted pane of glass slid downward, his face too close to hers. He smelled of aftershave and sweat, even though the day was young and the sun was still low in the sky. "You aren't lost, are you?" He winked.

"No—I..." The harness buckle relinquished its hold, and she tossed the straps aside. "I'm here to see Dr. Horton. I'm his...niece."

*This will never work!*

"Niece, huh? Well, you'd have to be from the other end of his gene pool, if you know what I mean." He winked again. How old was he? Twenty?

It was strange seeing a human in this line of work. Irena had grown accustomed to synthetics in such roles—waiters, clerks, guards. But here, in this *when*, twenty years in her own past, humans were still out and about, holding down real jobs in the real world. She'd noticed it earlier: all the people walking the streets in the sunshine as if they belonged out there. Not a zombie or ghoul among them. Link addicts were a rarity at this point in time.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"What?" *Of course I need an appointment.* What was she thinking?

The guard's winning smile made him look years younger—fresh out of secondary with a mandatory crew cut. "Don't tell me you think you can just swing on by the labs anytime you please?" He supported himself on the roof of the coupe. "Yes, you need an appointment. You've got to be on the list. You know what kind of stuff goes on around here?"

She shook her head, feigning naive ignorance.

"High level, top tier." He gestured above his head. "Stuff only the governors know about. Next-gen tech like you wouldn't believe. I mean, even the mayor would have to be on the list to get inside. And we'd have to turn *him* back if he didn't have an appointment. Trust me on that." He flexed his chest muscles. "I'd do it. Turn him back. It's my job, ma'am."

"You take it seriously."

"You bet I do!" He smiled again. "They say someday those synthetics will be holding down jobs like mine. You know, the ones they've got working now in factories and the like. But I don't see it happening. Not a chance one of those things could handle this the way I do."

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to turn me away?"

"Well now, that depends." He brought his glistening face closer to hers, self-enamored grin intact. "You got a name?"

Irena couldn't give him her name. In this *when*, Irena Horton was only fourteen years old. And she would not be driving yet. *My cousin?*

"Alternate parking located," droned the console.

"Hey now." The guard's attention drifted away from Irena for the first time. "You've got one of those new AI models. Very nice. I hear they're expensive." His wandering gaze returned, taking a slow scenic route from her midsection upward. "You must be a woman of considerable means."

"Cyrus Horton *is* my uncle." She shrugged.

"Right. You're his-uh *niece*." The appreciative look in his eyes cooled as they rose to meet hers. "He doesn't know you're stopping by?"

She held his gaze with as much confidence as she could muster. "It's a surprise. I haven't seen him in years." That much was true. *Before his creatures kidnapped me Underground*. "I didn't think he'd mind."

"I'll be the judge of that. As a rule, we don't disturb the scientists during their work periods." Another glance at her figure. The smile returned. "What's your name again?"

She hadn't told him. Not yet. "Ashland. Ashland Solomon."

"Well, Ashland. Let me see what I can do." He patted the roof and turned on his heel, taking long strides back to the guard station with one thumb casually hooked over his sidearm.

"Park or continue to idle?" droned the AI.

Irena watched the guard approach his companion. Words were exchanged, then laughter.

"I don't know yet," she said.

"Invalid command."

"Idle, then."

"Invalid command. Voiceprint unrecognizable."

"Oscar—idle," she rephrased, watching the console. *You better not Link up the police.* She knew its protocol all too well.

"Confirmed."

She exhaled and closed her eyes a moment. *I don't know if I can do this.* To see her father twenty years younger, before he ran out on his family—forced to disappear, according to him. The government supposedly shut down his work, disapproved of his research. Exiled him in disgrace. *Why would that make him leave us?* Had he ever truly loved Irena and her mother? Her one fond memory returned unbidden: her father dressed in white on New Year's Day...

"Ma'am?"

The guard had returned. Irena opened her eyes to find him leaning on the window frame, closer than before—as if he wanted to climb onto her lap. Maybe he did.

"Looks like today's not your lucky day." He frowned apologetically. "Seems Dr. Horton is currently out of his office, and his assistant doesn't know for sure when he'll be back."

She nodded. "I see." *It never would have worked, anyway.* "Thank you for your time. I'll be sure to make an appointment next—"

"But here's the funny thing." He paused to ruminate for a moment. "Your uncle's assistant has given you special permission to come on inside. He said he's been *expecting* you."

She could not hide her surprise. He chuckled at her unguarded expression.

"And lucky for you, I'll be your escort." He glanced at the empty bucket seat beside her. "Got room for two?"

"I—"

But he was already rounding the hood of the coupe with a broad smile, winking at her through the windshield.

"Oscar—open passenger door." The door drifted upward.

The guard whistled, taking a moment to run his eyes across the interior and his hand along the taut faux-leather upholstery.

"Very nice." He cursed softly. "The lady rides in style."

Before she could respond, he dropped into the seat and gestured at his companion beside the guard station. The gate crept open automatically under his watchful eye.

"Head on in. It can get a little confusing for first-timers, but fear not. You've got me as your guide."

She took hold of the steering grips. "Oscar—manual drive."

"Confirmed," the console droned.

The guard cursed again. "I don't know if I'd be able to get used to that, having my car talk back. And he's even got a name? *Oscar*, is that what you call it?"

"Invalid command."

She accelerated toward the gate, passing through the gap without pause. On the other side, the street diverged in three directions with the fortress itself looming straight ahead. She pointed.

"You'd think so, but you'll want to hang a left here. The entrance to your uncle's wing is on the east side of the complex." He returned his attention to the interior, to the computer console in particular. "So, Oscar, what else can you do?"

"Invalid command," the computer droned again.

She shot him a glance as he laughed.

"It can be...finicky at times," she explained. "There is a very specific script—"

"Does it like to watch you and your boyfriend in the backseat?" He looked over his shoulder and muttered, "Not much room back there."

"It's my husband's." She kept her eyes on the street.  
"The car belongs to him."

"Yeah? What's he do?"

"He's—" Her throat constricted. A flash of memory: Harry's head on the floor of his office, lying in a pool of his own blood. She clenched her teeth. "He's an investigator."

"Like a detective, you mean?" He grinned at her. "Is he a real *dick*?"

She pointed toward the parking structure ahead.  
"There?"

"Yeah." His smile faded. "You can pull up front, use your uncle's reserved spot. I don't think he'd mind, do you?"

"Let's hope not."

"Wouldn't want him to get angry or anything. These geniuses can be real bears when you cross them." He chuckled again. "So, your husband. Does he work with the local police much? Or are they mutually exclusive?"

Her lips parted. She stared straight ahead as she slowed the vehicle to a stop in front of the mirrored east wing entrance.

"The reason I ask, my cousin works for the NewCity municipal district. He's like a sergeant or something over there."

"Is that so?" She tapped the manual release for her door, and it floated upward.

"Yeah. Armstrong." His door rose as well. "Ring any bells?"

"Sorry," she said. She averted her eyes from his direct look. *Sergeant Armstrong*. She stepped out, her bare calf catching the warm morning sun. "Shall we?"

"Your wish is my command, ma'am." With another attempt at a charming smile, the guard hauled himself out of the bucket seat and dug a hand into the pants pocket of his drab uniform. He retrieved a white keycard. "This way."

She followed him to a narrow seam in the mirrored wall. He swiped the keycard across an invisible scanner and

pressed the palm of his hand against the reflective glass at a seemingly random spot. Irena noticed her reflection, standing there in the sleeveless black dress she'd managed to get for free at the train station mall. She looked like she was going to a funeral.

*My own?*

"Access granted," sighed an artificial, female-sounding voice in what couldn't be mistaken for anything but orgasmic delight.

"They call her *Eve*, the Alpha Geminorum AI. Believe it or not, she sounds that *happy* all the time—no matter what she's programmed to say. Nerds and their idle hands." He winked suggestively.

Growing up, Irena heard her father say it more than once: that he had no idea how her mother ended up with a nerd like him. She'd asked him what that word meant—*nerd*. Her father had smiled down at her, and after a moment's pause explained, "It's a guy who can't seem to get a date, no matter how hard he tries."

The mirrored wall shifted before them as a door glided open to the side.

"After you." The guard smiled yet again. It was a tic beyond his control: flashing his teeth.

Irena entered the spacious open-air vestibule, glancing back over her shoulder to see nothing but enormous panes of glass behind her, windows facing the sun-filled sky and the city's geometric outline beyond the security fence. Ahead, open floors with corridors ran from one hallway to the next, one level above another like a vertical maze. She counted a dozen in all, with figures in white coats moving to and fro like lab rats, diminishing in size the higher she looked.

"Quite a view." The guard stood at her elbow.

"It's..." Her eyes were wider than she would have liked. But this place was definitely— "Impressive."



"Not much to look at from the outside, but what we lack in exterior glamour, we more than make up for with interior design, I like to think." He inhaled with pride. Then he held out his arm toward the glass elevator across from them.

"Your uncle's assistant is waiting for you on level nine."

She moved forward, her heels echoing across the tiles. The guard followed close behind. She wondered how much longer she would need to humor him, whether he would shadow her until she left the premises.

"Up we go." He jammed his thumb against the glowing 9 on the panel, and the transparent doors slid shut. "You don't have problems with vertigo, do you?"

She shook her head pleasantly. "No."

"Some folks do. These lifts are really something." The elevator launched upward. "See what I mean?" He grinned as she grabbed onto the polished handrail with one hand. "And here we are." The doors slid open. "Fast, huh?"

She swallowed, slow to release the rail, finding that her legs had turned to jelly.

"They do everything in a big way around here. But you probably already know that. Your uncle's one of our biggest bigwigs!"

They approached a corridor with another security precaution—a solid steel door with no scanner, only an intercom on one side. The guard pressed the pad below the speaker and leaned in.

"Dr. Horton's niece is here." He waited, turning back to wink at Irena for the umpteenth time.

"Excellent," came a young man's voice that somehow sounded familiar, but Irena wasn't able to place it right away. "You may return to your post, Armstrong. I'll be with Ms. Solomon in a minute."

Armstrong looked stricken, but he did his best to recover. "I'm sure Dr. Horton would rather I stick around, to escort his niece—"

"Dr. Horton is not here, Armstrong."

"Right, but—"

"Are you ignorant of the chain of command at Alpha Geminorum?"

The guard turned his back to Irena, his shoulders rounded now. "No sir," he muttered into the intercom.

"Good. Thank you for your assistance. Now return to your post."

Armstrong remained facing the intercom as if he'd forgotten where he was. Irena wouldn't be sorry to see him leave; but strangely enough, she found herself pitying the young man. It was as if the voice on the intercom had stuck him with a pin, and now he was only a shriveled version of his former self.

He turned around and attempted another smile, this time with obvious effort. "Looks like you're in good hands here, ma'am. I've never met this assistant of Dr. Horton's... But I'm sure you'll be fine."

He stepped close to her, too close, without seeming to notice the effect it had on her. Every muscle in her body wanted to pull back. He lowered his voice. "These nerds don't see too many beautiful women running around here. So if you feel uncomfortable at any time with this guy, this *assistant*—you give me a call, all right? Extension 436—Ronald Armstrong. I'm just watching out for you, ma'am. Dr. Horton would appreciate it, I know."

"I'm sure he would," she managed, reeling inwardly at his sweat and aftershave concoction.

He turned on his heel and took the elevator down without a glance back. Irena faced the security door and prepared herself for what would come next. Whatever that might be. She hoped it wouldn't involve the police. Impersonating the daughter of SYNCorp's founder, Dr. Solomon? Sneaking into a secure research facility? But she wasn't sneaking.

*Why is this assistant expecting me?*

The door clicked and slid heavily to the side. Irena blinked, unable to believe her eyes. For there stood her father as she remembered him from long ago, when she was only a girl. When he'd vanished completely from her life.

"Hello," he said with a hint of a smile, both hands tucked into the pockets of his white lab coat. His shoulders were only beginning to arch forward, his dark hair showing early traces of grey at the temples, his face clean-shaven with chiseled features. He was so *young*.

"Hello..." The sight of him nearly knocked the wind out of her. "I was told that you wouldn't be here."

"Is that what Armstrong said?" He seemed annoyed.

"Yes." *I didn't know how I would react to seeing you again.* Like this.

"Well, I'm afraid he was only half-right. Which would make him half-wrong, as well." His eyes twinkled, and the corners of his mouth curved to follow suit. "Won't you come in?" He stepped aside and gestured with an outstretched arm for her to enter.

Of course she would. She was here to ask him about his research. To find out more about the BackTracker, the plastic wristwatch lying in her handbag. She was not here as this man's daughter, to be reunited with a father she'd hated and missed in equal measure for the past two decades. That was irrelevant.

*All that matters is saving Harry's life.*

This man, as far as she knew, was the only person in the world who could help her.

"Would you like some coffee?" He backed away as the door slid shut and locked with a metallic clunk.

They were in a large office with a wall of windows that looked out on a multitude of figures in identical lab coats and goggles, standing over computer monitors and blinking electronic equipment, laboratory apparatuses of all shapes and sizes. Irena didn't know what she was looking at, but

she had a feeling she was seeing things the public at large would never be privy to.

"Fresh-brewed this morning." Her father stood at an alcove beside his massive desk, open digital files strewn across the glowing surface. He held a coffee pitcher in one hand and an empty mug in the other. "May I tempt you?"

She smiled at that. She couldn't help herself. Her eyes stung, and she blinked away the possibility of tears.

*May I tempt you? The house smelling like fresh cookies as she crept downstairs in her pajamas, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. There he was in the kitchen, smiling at her, offering her a platter of warm, melted, chocolate goodness.*

"Yes. Thank you." She stepped closer to the desk. *Where do I begin?* She opened the snap on her handbag and reached inside. Her fingers brushed against the watch.

"You have it with you?"

Her hand froze in the purse. She rotated her eyes upward to meet his.

"Armstrong didn't confiscate it?" He nodded toward the handbag. "Sometimes they take such things."

"My bag?"

Mug of steaming coffee in hand, he approached her. "He must not have seen you as much of a threat."

Her frame relaxed. *He doesn't know what I have, just as he doesn't know I'm his daughter.*

"Just a niece visiting her uncle," she said flippantly—and regretted the words as soon as she said them. *Stupid! Stupid!*

He smiled as he handed her the mug. "Oh, but you're not Ashland." His tone was matter-of-fact.

The room lurched, and she almost dropped the coffee. *I'm such a fool. This was a huge mistake.*

"You're about the right age, though. She is in her early thirties, from what I recall. And your coloring, your hair and eyes, are quite similar. But you were always much prettier than your cousin, Irena." He chuckled at her expression.

"How...do you know?" she managed to articulate. *How is it possible that he would recognize me? I'm easily twice the age of his daughter—the younger me, at this point in time.*

He opened his hand toward the plush armchair across from his desk. "Please." He seated himself. "Trust me, you'll want to hear this sitting down."

She sat stiffly. The coffee remained untouched in one hand. The handbag remained open in the other.

"You would expect a father to recognize his daughter no matter what, wouldn't you?" A thoughtful smile played on his lips. "Regardless of the passage of time. You were always dear to your father's heart, and he loved you more than his own life. He would have given anything to see you grow up, to be part of your—"

"Wait." Why was he speaking about himself in the third person? "Why—?"

"I am not your father, Irena."

She set the coffee down. "Then who the hell are you?"

He paused briefly. "I'm Cyrus Horton—anatomically, physiologically, psychologically. I even have Dr. Horton's ident tag." He held out his wrist and watched her. "But I am not your father."

She nodded slowly. In this *when*, maybe he wasn't her father. Of course, he couldn't be. He was the father of a fourteen-year-old girl named Irena Horton. *My father lives Underground and creates SYN-children to keep himself company.* That was her father. This Cyrus Horton was only a memory of the man her father had once been.

"You know who I am." She narrowed her gaze.

"Of course. Your father told me you would be arriving soon. I am here to help you in any way I can."

"My father told you." *This doesn't make any sense!*

"Yes. He is a great man. It is an immense honor to bear his image."

"Wait a minute." Her stomach sank with the sudden realization. "He made you?"

"Of course." He chuckled. "Was I not clear? Forgive me if I led you to believe something different. That was not my intention. It is not in my nature to be deceptive."

"You're a SYN."

He nodded. "Yes, cloned by Dr. Horton himself to carry the full extent of his knowledge and years of experience, so he would be able to perform twice the amount of work and research an average human is capable of. When he is out of the office, I continue his projects here at the lab, even when the other staff have gone home for the night. I have no need for sleep, you see. It has worked out quite well for us. Lately, we have been able to make extraordinary progress in the realm of temporal mechanics, a territory most physicists have left uncharted for decades."

"Good for you. Both of you." Her tone was flat. It would be just like her father to clone himself. The epitome of narcissism.

"All very illegal, of course, which is why no one knows of my existence. Other than you, that is." He smiled warmly, hands open. "So here I am, with all of your father's expertise, and I am at your disposal. How may I be of service?"

"What makes you think I need your...service?"

He paused, collecting his thoughts before he spoke. A very human and fatherly mannerism. "You have traveled back through time twenty years to save your husband's life. Yet you do not understand how to use the device sitting right now in your purse. You have come here for assistance without knowing whether or not you would face the estranged father from your childhood. Yet you have done all of this. For love."

She dropped her gaze, trembling inside but fighting it. Tears pooled in her eyes.

"And so, Irena Muldoon, I offer all that I can. If you have need of me."

She bit her lip and willed the tears away. Even so, one of them escaped, trickling down her cheek. She caught it with the back of her hand.

"Why?" she asked, near a whisper.

"Because your father loves you."

She met his gaze warily but found no guile there.

"And because I love you, too." He smiled at her, and she knew it was true—somehow, some sort of emotional imprint had been stamped upon his synthetic psyche, much like Cade's steadfast loyalty. She saw it in his eyes. "Now then." He cleared his throat, leaning forward with a serious frown. "Tell me what you plan to do next."

She reached into her handbag again but stopped, glancing toward the windows and the busy lab workers beyond.

"Don't worry about them. The glass is mirrored on their side, and they will have more than enough to keep them busy in the next few minutes, believe me."

"What do you mean?"

"Our time here is short." He gestured toward her purse. "If you please."

Could she trust him? *What other choice do I have?* She withdrew the plastic wristwatch and set it atop the glass deskscreen.

He inhaled at the sight of it, excitement dancing behind his eyes. "Incredible. I've known of its existence for some time, but I have never been allowed to see one for myself." He reached forward with eager fingers. "May I?"

She nodded, and he took the device as one would a priceless artifact, turning it over and shaking his head in awe.

"It brought me here." She didn't know what else to say. *I need it to take me back further, but I don't know how it works.* "I don't know how to...set it."

"To return you to your time?"

"It's complicated." She paused, remembering what Cade had said. "I think it's set to bring me back to its own time—ten years *before* my time, if that makes any sense."

*Harry had it when he disappeared that night. When he took it back to his younger self.*

"I see." He nodded, eyes transfixed on the watch's blank screen.

"But I need to go even further back." She swallowed. "Into the past."

"Yes, I know."

She frowned. *How? I don't even know what I'm doing—how could he?*

"All of this has already happened, Irena." He winced slightly. "Let me rephrase that. What I mean to say is, your father has foretold the events that are about to unfold—"

"My father? What do you mean?"

"He came to see me, Irena—from the future, both yours and mine. He told me when you would arrive, and that I must help you in this way." He held up the watch. "I can set the BackTracker for any moment in the past that you desire, within certain limits. Say the word, and it is done."

She parted her lips to reply, but at that moment a violent crash echoed in the laboratory outside, accompanied by a jarring security alarm. Screams echoed as white coats churned in turmoil, armed figures garbed in black body armor charging in among them.

"They're here." Cyrus Horton's clone stood, reaching for the wall behind him.

"SECURITY ALERT," Eve the AI gasped with great pleasure from the ceiling speakers.

"What's going on?" Irena stood as the squad of Blackshirts moved with purpose, shoving bewildered lab techs out of their way. "Why are they here?"

The clone pressed his palm against the wall, and a section of the paneling, two meters by two, slid aside to reveal a dark corridor beyond.



"Don't you remember? When you were a child, your father failed to return home one night, and you never saw him again." He paused. "This is what happened, Irena. The Federal police have been sent to shut him down and destroy his work. But fortunately for us, he has already gone into hiding." He smiled. "You and I must now do the same. This way."

He beckoned to her as he stepped into the corridor.

She wavered for a moment, indecisive. Alpha Geminorum security personnel had marched onto the scene in the lab. She recognized Armstrong. He was scowling, reaching for his sidearm, pointing at the intruders as if they had no business being there. One of the Blackshirts pivoted to face him, snub-nosed automatic rifle held at waist level. Without a word, he squeezed off a dozen rounds. Armstrong jerked backward, arms lifted, floating in the air as blood exploded in black bursts across his grey uniform. Irena turned away and rushed after the man who looked like her father.

"We have to hurry." The clone took her hand and broke into a run.

*I can't see a thing in here.* She glanced back. The hidden panel remained open, a square of white. "Won't they follow us?"

"Perhaps, but we'll be long gone by then."

"Is this some kind of tunnel?"

"Your father made it for me, so that I could move about the complex unobserved. I have access to the same secured areas that he does, but this way I avoid interacting face-to-face with any of the support personnel."

"Where are we going?"

"Not where. *When*. Give me your temporal destination so I can reset the BackTracker. Then we'll disappear, leaving this mayhem behind."

"We?"

"Yes, Irena. I am going with you."

More gunfire erupted in the distance behind them, a chorus of chaos and violence.

"How can they do this?"

"Someone has been leaking our research onto the Link. Your father and I have successfully created various devices based on our discoveries—and one of them has gone missing." He squeezed her hand again. "The BackTracker prototype."

"But how does that involve the government?"

"They warned us some time ago to cease and desist our research into alter-life phenomena—a branch of quantum mechanics left unexplored by most physicists. The governors do not want anyone tampering with the status quo. They prefer things the way they are, which is understandable. They are the ones in power, after all." He squeezed her hand. "And we disobeyed a direct order."

"Where is my father?"

"Deep underground by now. Somehow, he knew it would come to this."

The clone came to a sudden halt and released her hand. He felt along the wall, his fingertips gliding across the paneling in a practiced manner despite the lack of light.

"Here we are." He pressed a point that receded on impact, and the wall slid aside, uncovering a burst of white. "This is your father's central lab station," he winced at the ear-piercing alarm. "Empty for now."

She blinked and plugged a finger in each ear. The room appeared to be identical to that lab invaded by gun-toting Blackshirts: the same sterile white monitors and scattered equipment, the same wall of windows looking out on another laboratory easily ten times the size of this one. Silent. Still.

"Now what?" The area had been vacated, but the image of Armstrong gunned down remained fresh in her mind. No one was safe at Alpha Geminorum. Not today.

He held up the wristwatch. "All I need is a date and a time that—"

"What do I do?" She paused, sorting through her thoughts. "You said my father came to you from the future. So you know what I'm supposed to do next, right? You can tell me."

A sad smile flickered across his features. "I can't, Irena."

"Why not?" She stared at him as a jittery energy coursed through her. She felt like she was going to be sick.

"You must do what you think is right. Otherwise, we risk creating a divergence in the timeline." He reached out and took her hand again, squeezing it gently. "Trust me. You know what you must do."

She shook her head. *I really don't.*

"Focus, Irena. You can do this. You already have!"

Her eyes came to rest on the BackTracker. *I've already done whatever it is that I'm going to do.* "What if I make a mistake?"

"Remember why you are here, in this place, at this time. Keep that purpose in the forefront of your mind. It will not matter what mistakes you make along the way. You will succeed."

*Harry.* She saw her young husband lying dead at Cade's feet. *I can't go back and fight him.*

Cade would easily overpower her. He would return to the past and kill Harry again even if she somehow managed to save his life. It was in Cade's programming now, thanks to her father. So there was only one other option.

*I have to go further back. Further than they would ever expect.*

"All right. Here goes nothing." She gave him a date and time from more than forty years in her past, before she was even born.

He nodded as he set the device, fingers moving deftly. "Lucky for us, your father's technology existed at that point in time, albeit in rudimentary form."

"Why does my father—from the future—want you to help me? He's the one who had my husband killed."

"Everyone makes mistakes, Irena."

"What?" She seethed at his lack of emotion.

"Here we are. Good to go." He took her hand and slipped the wristwatch onto her, snapping it into place. He grasped both her hands and looked her in the eye. She was surprised by the intense affection she found there, as if he loved her like his own daughter.

Outside, the door to the larger laboratory blew open, and another squad of Blackshirts rushed in with weapons drawn. Their laser sights darted straight to the windows.

The clone winced. "No mirrored glass here, I'm afraid."

A staccato of weapons fire erupted all at once, and the windows shattered, cascading down like rain, scattering in millions of plastiglass pieces across the floor. The Blackshirts broke ranks and rushed inside the lab station where the woman and the scientist stood hand-in-hand.

"Cease fire!"

There were no bullet-riddled bodies waiting for them. Because after a flash of blue light, the man and woman had ceased to exist. Vanished. As if they'd never been there at all.

Irena and the clone stood in the middle of the laboratory, just as they had a moment ago. Only now they were surrounded by gaping lab techs.

"Someone call security!" one shouted, coming to his senses.

"Who the hell are you?" said another one.

"How did you get in here?" demanded another.

The clone stepped forward, hands raised in surrender to put them at ease. "This is very unexpected, I'm sure," he began with a smile designed to charm them into submission. "Believe me, my associate and I had no idea we would land here, but that's a risk you take when you're in research and development. Am I right?" He chuckled knowingly.

They remained immovable.

"Old Solomon and his matter displacement prototype," the clone muttered, shaking his head with disappointment. "Would you believe me if I told you we were supposed to end up on the other side of town?" He scoffed. "Not the other side of the complex!"

"So you're with..."

"Iron Balls himself? That's right. We drew the short straws, so to speak. The first human test subjects. Quite an honor, I must confess—"

"You wouldn't mind if I called Dr. Solomon, just to check on your story?" The lab tech crossed his arms.

"Be my guest. I'm sure he'd love to hear it from a lackey such as yourself, that his latest invention is a bust. And be sure to give him your name, while you're at it. Because if you don't, I will." The clone squinted, leaning forward to read the tech's nametag. "Wilson, is it? I'm sure you have a bright future ahead of you here at Alpha Geminorum. As do the rest of you." He scanned their tags. "Emert, Peters, DePriest, Henrichsen, Barnes. Shining stars, all of you. I'm sure Dr. Solomon will be pleased to know that you offered his test subjects such a warm welcome. What division is this, by the way? Artificial intelligence?"

Wilson's arms dropped to his sides. His eyes darted first to Barnes, then Emert, a stocky fellow with a shock of white hair held in place by the latest feat of cosmetic engineering.

"What do you say, Wilson?" It was Emert who spoke, stepping forward to tug off his lab coat and drape it around Irena's shoulders. She hadn't realized she was shivering.

"Thank you." She pulled it close. Traveling through time, in her experience, was a cold journey.

"Wilson?" Emert waited, one eyebrow raised.

Grumbling to himself, Wilson folded his arms and dropped his head. He wouldn't be calling anybody about this interruption.

"Give Dr. Solomon our best," Barnes spoke up after clearing her throat. "We-uh all make mistakes from time to time."

"I'd appreciate it if we could keep this one between us. What do you think? I'm sure the old boy will get it right sooner or later, but until then, well..." The clone winked. "You might see us a little more often than you'd like, I'm afraid."

A murmur of hesitant laughter rippled through them.

"We could get used to it," Peters piped up with a grin as toothy as it was eager. He hadn't taken his eyes off Irena from the moment she'd appeared out of the air. Barnes proceeded to plow his ribs with her elbow.

"What he means to say is, we understand. The development phase is always prone to certain...hiccups?" Barnes attempted a smile, but her gaunt cheeks seemed unaccustomed to the expression, and she let it fade.

Emert clapped the clone on the back with his massive paw. "We wish you the best of luck. Tell Dr. Solomon that our thoughts are with him." He escorted the clone to the lab door. The others closed in, and Irena followed the form of her father. "You know the way out? Hate to rush you like this, but you know how it is. We've got our own little *hiccups* to attend to on this end. No rest for the wicked!"

"Of course, of course. We know the way, but..." The clone's expression clouded, and he cleared his throat. "This isn't exactly our neighborhood. Any chance you could loan us a keycard to exit this wing?"

"Not a problem." Emert held out his palm without looking back. "Wilson. You won't mind letting them borrow yours."

"You can't be serious," Wilson fumed.

"We have work to do, and so do they. Let's help them be on their way."

Barnes and the others glared at Wilson until the peer pressure was too much for him. With a muttered oath, he

begrudgingly relinquished the lanyard from around his neck. The white keycard dangled from his clenched fist.

Irena watched as her father's clone bowed his head graciously and took the card. Then he turned to escort her out of the lab by her elbow. Only when the door had swished shut behind them, leaving them alone in the corridor outside, did she exhale.

"Nervous?" He grinned as he led them onward.

*Was I holding my breath?* "How did you know? Dr. Solomon..." *My uncle.*

"We are forty years in your past. Your uncle was the senior scientist in the north division at this time. I merely assumed that Alpha Geminorum was run in a similar fashion as it is in my day—double-blind, with each wing's lab techs completely ignorant of what goes on in the rest of the complex." He winked.

"Deception is in your nature." She watched him.

That made him pause. "So it would seem."

His apparent aptitude for thinking on his feet could prove to be useful. Particularly when they arrived at the modest home of the Muldoon family and would have to find some way to kidnap their only son, lying sound asleep in his crib.

## FIFTEEN

*Now*

"Where are you?" she asked.

Gavin Lennox felt the sheets stir beside him. Her breath came warm and humid against his ear as she nuzzled the lobe with the tip of her nose.

He stared at his reflection in the ceiling mirrors. Arms and legs out straight atop a sea of white silk. Eyes staring vacantly at themselves, almost oblivious to her smooth, curvaceous form nestled against him, her long fingers tracing the thick ripples of muscle across his arms and chest. Drifting lower along the ridges of his abdomen, exploring the appendage below as it recovered from their recent romp.

"I thought you needed to see me." She rose up on one arm and supported her head of long, wild black hair in the palm of her hand. "Or did you already get what you wanted?"

She bit her lip at his lack of response. She watched him for a moment. Then she pinched him.

"Hey." He frowned, brushing her hand away.

"It speaks."

He closed his eyes. "It's late."

"It was late when I got here. You better not be kicking me out. A walk of shame isn't in the cards for me tonight, sweetheart."

He groaned. "Your limo is in the alley, Ashland. No one will see you."

She cursed him and rolled away onto her side, tugging the sheet. "Go to sleep then, you bastard."



He glanced at her. *It's probably already on the Link: NewCity Power Couple Merging Interests.* Or some other witty innuendo. Didn't matter that he left the side door open for her, that she never came in through The Pearl's front entrance. The media were viral and feral, as a rule. Their drones could sneak anywhere, catch anything. Then broadcast it across the Link. News didn't have to be verified. Seeing was believing.

He exhaled. *I can't stay here.*

"I thought you were tired," Ashland said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

"It's been a crazy night."

*Horton. Those monks. That kid.*

"Then go to sleep, why don't you?"

"I was trying."

"Not with your wheels turning like that, you won't. You'll keep us both awake." She flipped onto her back with a curse. "You're obsessed."

"And you're not?"

She frowned up at the mirrored ceiling. "How is it even remotely similar?"

"We both want what we can't have."

"I'm not chasing phantoms. What I want is within my reach. But you..." She reached for him. "What you want is the *world*, my dear."

He closed his eyes as she caressed his lower abdomen with the palm of her hand.

*I can't be trapped. I'll lose my mind.*

He wasn't a spiritual man. Like many others of his generation, he considered himself post-religious. Yet his recent discussion with those monks regarding the human soul had awakened something within him—an awareness of life that existed beyond all which could be seen, bought, and sold. What would be left, should his life be taken from him tonight? Would he simply cease to exist?

*Joining the void that was, and is, and will be forevermore.*

"Where are you?" she whispered again. She pressed her forehead against his ear and took his face in her hand. "Talk to me, Gavin."

"I've done...horrible things." He clenched his jaw. *Who are you?* he asked the reflection above, stuck to the ceiling like a frothing demoniac from one of the Link's paranormal interactives. "I had a man killed tonight."

"Who was he?" She sounded curious.

*Who am I?* "An inventor. Cyrus Horton."

She sighed, tracing the side of his face, his jaw, his pronounced cheekbone with her fingertips. "Thought you'd put that sort of thing behind you. The murder, the mayhem. The Gangster shtick."

"You said it yourself. I'm obsessed."

*I won't let anyone stand in my way. And in the end, I'll die like every other man who's become overwhelmed by his own desires. And if the Wayists are right, if there is a Hell—*

"You are." She squeezed him. "We both are. That's why we get along so well." She began to nibble at his ear, gently at first, then biting, pulling. "You and me," she said around her teeth, grinning at him as she tugged. "SYNCorp and The Pearl, literally in bed together. The NewCity Power Couple."

"Where did you hear that?" He glared at her.

His ear slipped from her grasp. "It's been on the Link for weeks." She shrugged her bare shoulders, white and smooth. Her skin was perfect, youthful. Hard to believe she was in her sixties or seventies—exact age to be determined. The wonders of modern gene therapy. "I guess the cat's out of the bag, Baby. How long did you think we could keep our little trysts a secret? Big Brother sees all and hears all. It was only a matter of time."

He looked away.

She pinched his cheek. "I say we use it."

"Conflict of interest? How could we ever use that to our advantage?"

He sat up, leaving her arm to withdraw in his absence. He swung his legs over the side of the massive bed and hung his head, staring at the featureless carpet. Her fingers traced the muscles of his back.

"There's no conflict that I can see. We're the new royalty. Gavin Lennox and Ashland Solomon—king and queen of NewCity."

"I doubt our duly elected governors would ever go for that," he muttered. "They'll have us assassinated in our sleep."

"Why do you have to be so negative? I'm talking about our place in this town. You've said it yourself. What we have here is special. It works. The *Revival*, right? Shouldn't be long before emissaries from the other Provinces start showing up and asking about the secrets to our success. Like King Solomon of old, and the Queen of Sheba."

*They're already here.* Kuan Ti and Yeng Zhu. But he doubted they were anything close to what they claimed to be.

"Reeves had a couple with him tonight," he said absently.

"A couple of what?" She rose onto her elbow.

"Wise men from the East." He smiled. "We held a lengthy debate of sorts regarding your synthetics. Whether or not they have souls."

*Do I? Is it damned?*

"Well, what was the verdict?"

His thick shoulders rose and fell. "Want a drink?" He stood without waiting for a response and stretched for a moment. Then he left the room with long strides, his gaze set straight ahead.

"Whatever," she murmured in his wake. The sheets slipped beneath her as she rolled over to bury her face in the pillow. Within moments, she would be sound asleep.

The hallway was dark, silent, the rooms empty on each side. Beneath the carpet, the floor vibrated almost imperceptibly, the only indication that not everyone in The Pearl had gone to bed. On the contrary, the SYNs in the BigBand, on the dance floor, at the tables, and standing in line outside waiting to be let in were as awake as ever, fully prepared to party the entire night away, far into the wee hours of morning and beyond, until the duties of their day jobs beckoned. Then, after their work shifts, they would return with a full day's worth of credit to spend, and the cycle would resume.

Conflict of interest, indeed. Ashland Solomon's SYNCorp provided the workforce of NewCity. The Pearl of the great and powerful Gavin Lennox provided a place for them to spend eight hours of income on a single night of frolicking and feeling human. The Power Couple had shared the same bed for years now. Their economic interests had done the same from the start.

The Link's gossip-mongers had probably guessed it all along, that he and Ashland were more than mutually beneficial—and successful—entrepreneurs. Unseen eyes had noticed her limousine pull up beside The Pearl late at night to park in the shadows, seen her duck inside the alley door surrounded by genetically engineered muscle, watched as she'd placed her hand on the sensor grate next to a door marked PRIVATE.

*Is nothing private anymore?*

He entered the spacious common room of the penthouse and stopped, his bare toes sinking into the carpet. His eyes turned toward the panoramic window and the light outside, the life. It drew his steps with a magnetism he couldn't resist.

He watched them: The tuxedos. The white dresses with bits of crystal that caught the light and flashed as they swept across the dance floor. The waiters, the George models. Here and there, a Sally. No humans to be seen.

They'd all gone home for the night, left The Pearl to its nocturnal residents who had no need for sleep.

*Good for me.* In his mind, Lennox saw the credits scroll faster than he could read them. Most of it spent already. Unfortunate.

The beheaded mandroid left in the middle of the street would have to be replaced. Alpha Geminorum had cornered the market long ago on such refurbished killing machines from the war and insisted on raising the price every year. Ashland had tried to convince him to hire synthetics for security—it would be less expensive, she said, and they would be easily replaceable at no extra cost. But he knew better. Sure, the mandroids were expensive, but he didn't have to pay them a single credit for their services. And how often had he needed to replace one, anyway? They'd been virtually indestructible. Until now.

*Two in the alley, heads struck from their shoulders by a flying albino.*

He squeezed his temples. No, that was in a different reality. An entirely separate cash flow. Three mandroids needed replacing at The Pit, and three more here at The Pearl. Coincidence? Gavin Lennox knew better. There was no such thing. Only reflections.

The boy was over there now, in that world's version of this very room. Kuan the holy man was with him. George had been told to leave them there until Lennox decided what to do with them. Question them? Torture them? Kill them? So many options.

Here, he had learned the man's name. The boy's *protector*, who shot up The Pearl and abducted Yeng the holy man. Yeng had managed to escape and go to the police, who contacted Lennox as soon as they'd finished taking the monk's statement. Harold Muldoon, they said. That's who they were after. Manhunt in progress. Updates forthcoming.

Harold Muldoon, retired private investigator. Former police lackey, now a recluse. The years had taken their toll

on him, by all accounts.

Muldoon had dropped off the map, and Lennox was never sorry to see his kind go the way of the dinosaur. By their very nature, private investigators tended to be a thorn in one's side, particularly when one had the mayor in one's pocket and a police force that didn't step out of line. Knew when to look the other way. Private eyes worked for themselves, sometimes for their clients. They had a bad habit of bucking the system, asking too many questions, poking the darkness to see what scuttled out. No respect at all. The darkness was better left alone. It thrived on inattention.

Now with the Link, anyone could play detective. All information was instantly accessible. Lennox had assumed PI's were a lost breed, extinct; someone like this Harold Muldoon should have died out with the rest.

Obviously not. This particular PI was alive and well, back in action with a vengeance, by all appearances. Shooting automatons and abducting monks. Dangerous? Perhaps. What did it mean? What had he wanted with Yeng Zhu? What connection did he have with Cyrus Horton's son?

Something had brought them all to The Pearl's very door. Some bizarre twist of fate? Hardly.

Lennox had played the main part, luring Horton to The Pearl in the first place. A lot of good that had done. The geezer was confused by his own shadow. Such a disappointment, to have fallen so far from genius. Served him right to end up in pieces.

Had Lennox suffered some kind of lapse, reverting to his gangster ways as Ashland said? He'd been so careful lately, worked so hard to keep his new image untarnished. But none of that mattered now. Kuan Ti and the boy were somewhere this Muldoon fellow would never find them. Trapped in another world. Far beyond his reach, or anyone else's.

*Have fun chasing your tail, detective.* He never should have come out of retirement. All that Muldoon had to look forward to now was a cramped prison cell. *I'll have to make sure he shares a block with a dozen of the men he helped put away.*

The PI would be put in his place, and in the process, he would learn a valuable lesson: no one messed with Gavin Lennox. Not anyone in NewCity, anyway. And once he had the BackTracker in his possession, no one on the planet would ever be able to threaten his destiny again. He would become invincible.

For whoever controlled the past owned the future.

Yet he remembered all too clearly that sickening sense of dread that came upon him earlier. After Ashland arrived and he'd swept her off to the bedroom without a word spoken between them. After the cardiovascular workout they'd shared beneath the mirrored glass, their bare flesh writhing in ecstasy across white silk and satin. After she had drifted off to sleep beside him. The question had crept through his mind like a cold whisper. He'd stared up at his reflection and thought for the first time, *What if I never find it? What if I never break free of this fixed point in time?*

As a rule, Lennox did not allow such doubts to surface. He was an uncommonly lucky man, and as a result, he was accustomed to things going his way. Life was a game for him to win, and he knew how to manipulate the results so they would always be in his favor. Because he knew how to manipulate people.

Human beings were simple machines; they could be programmed, much like SYNs. Say the right things, present the correct triggers, and you could make just about anyone do whatever you wanted them to do. The best part? They would think it was their own idea, all along.

But this time, things were different. He had two worlds to consider, and two versions of himself to play the role of master manipulator. Not a problem in any other situation,

except now he had the distinct impression that unforeseen forces were conspiring against him. That albino outside The Pit. The monks kidnapping Horton's son. This Muldoon fellow at The Pearl. All somehow related, across two different realities. As if the BackTracker didn't want to be found in either world.

The closer Lennox came to possessing it, would he face even more resistance? Was that what he had to look forward to? He almost laughed at the thought. What was this? Superstition? Cold feet? He wished he knew.

He turned away from the wall of glass and returned to the bedroom. He stopped at the doorway, his gaze resting on Ashland's sleeping curves beneath the sheet.

"Lights off," he murmured. The room plunged into darkness.

He stepped into an empty room down the hall. In this reality, it was a study with a case of antique books, hardbound with real paper and glue, worth a small fortune. He retrieved the silver lighter from the hidden room's safe and righted the good *Dr. Jekyll*.

Time to visit his captive audience and pick their brains a bit. See what fell out. After the Q&A, depending on how much they frustrated him, he would figure out what to do with them. Maybe he'd play the part of *Mr. Hyde* and trample them underfoot. The old gangster shtick could be amusing at times. For him.

He flipped the cap off the lighter and stared into the flame.

Moments later, Lennox stood in the armory, in the identical penthouse above The Pit. There beside him in the dark sat racks of rifles and handguns and the locked carousel of one-of-a-kind prototype weapons he'd bought off those double-dealers at Alpha Geminorum. Also present: the attire Sir Gavin was known for in this reality. Trench coat and boots, chain mail tunic, and steel-studded leather pants.



After shaking out his hair and making himself presentable, he took down a sawed-off shotgun and scooped out a handful of shells from the ammunition case, dumping them into the pocket of his coat. He jammed a revolver into the back of his pants. More ammo clinked into another pocket. Then he strode out of the armory, shotgun down at his side, coat flailing behind him, left arm swinging easily, fingers flexing. His boots thudded across the carpet.

*Armed for bear*—was that the saying? The next unforeseen forces to interfere with his quest would be greeted with extreme prejudice. *I almost feel sorry for them.*

He entered the common area and halted. It should have been no surprise. Of course the boy and the monk were not alone. That would have been too easy.

Three Blackshirts lay on the floor, incapacitated but breathing. Not shot; they had been beaten to the ground. Unclear why they would be here.

The boy, Harry, lay unconscious on a couch. Blood oozed from both ears. The albino monk tended to him, hand to his brow. The same apparition from the alley, now without his sword or his beautiful companion. Kuan Ti stood by, looking on with concern.

There were three others in the room Lennox did not recognize.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Sir Gavin—" A George model, restrained by a large black man, squirmed in a frenzy at the sight of his employer. "Take them out, sir! Kill them all!"

"Let him go." Lennox brought up the shotgun and aimed it in the general direction of the man's head.

"Do as he says, Peter." A tall, pale girl spoke in a lilting voice. Her bright eyes were both beautiful and afraid.

"Release him."

Peter growled deep in his chest. He glared at Lennox with nostrils flared. His massive hand, missing two fingers,

rose to grip the SYN by the throat. He squeezed. George wheezed.

"Peter," the girl gasped, trembling.

"Take him," Peter rumbled, hurling George forward.

The SYN staggered, almost pitching onto his painted and pierced face. Hand to his neck, he joined Lennox with, "Thank you, sir."

"What's going on here?" Lennox said.

"I don't know. We've—" George swallowed and winced. "We've had our hands full. These three—the big one, the girl, that older one over there—they tore through the place downstairs. You should see it, everybody's gone—even *Torment* took off. I've never seen them so scared. Of anything."

"No one else is here?"

"Alive? No... A few bodies, a lot of blood. That one has a sword." George pointed at the one named Peter.

*What is it with swords lately?*

"The mandroids, too—totally demolished. Anybody who stood in their way. You should have seen it." He pointed again, this time toward the panoramic window overlooking the silent nightclub below. "It's a real mess."

"Have you come back for us, Mr. Lennox?" Kuan Ti faced him now and moved to cross the gap between them.

Lennox pulled the revolver from his belt and leveled it with the holy man's face. "Stay put." His eyes shifted away from Peter, but the shotgun didn't. To George, he said, "Go to the armory."

The SYN nodded and left the room.

Kuan tucked his hands into the drooping sleeves across his middle. He kept his distance. "Why then have you returned, Mr. Lennox?"

"It should be obvious." He smiled at the monk then, and the expression was intended to confirm his control of this insane situation. *An unsteady façade?* "I'm here to clean up."

"What does he mean?" the girl whispered to the stoop-shouldered old man beside her. He shrugged. No idea.

"He means to kill us all." It was the albino who spoke, rising and turning to face Lennox.

"Nothing so dramatic." *Hello again. No acrobatics this time?* Lennox chuckled without humor. He restrained his left hand from squeezing off shots that would drop both holy men where they stood. "I'm not going to kill *all* of you."

The girl gasped, covering her face and falling against the old man's shoulder. "Paul, I don't want to die!" He did his best to comfort her, gnarled hands patting her shoulder.

Peter growled again, seething, oversized fists clenched down at his sides. "We are here to take back what belongs to our father. We have no quarrel with you."

George returned with two automatic rifles—one slung over his shoulder, the other gripped and twitching from one target to the next as he entered the room. "What now, sir?"

Lennox nodded toward the fallen Blackshirts. "Get them on their feet."

"Two of them may be unable to walk for a while," Kuan offered. "We injured them, I'm afraid."

"So much for turning the other cheek, eh?" Lennox smirked. "You religious types are all the same. Your rigid beliefs are so easily bent."

"We are human. None of us is perfect." Kuan shook his head. "No, not one."

"What's wrong with him?" Lennox glanced down at the boy.

"I do not know." The albino didn't seem to notice the gun aimed at him. He stared hard into Lennox's eyes. "He needs to see a doctor."

*He's outlived his usefulness.* "A ruptured brain aneurysm or something, perhaps." Lennox noted the blood. "He's dead, either way."

"Not if we get him the help he needs," Kuan said.

"Not happening. Not until I get what I want."

Kuan raised an eyebrow. "Do we appear to have anything of value, Mr. Lennox?"

The Blackshirt captain stirred on the floor, cursing as George jostled him with murmured invocations.

"What do you want?" Peter growled.

Lennox smiled again. This time it was just as confident as he wanted it to be. "Believe it or not, gentlemen—and *lady*," he nodded to the girl. She ignored the gesture. "We are all here for a reason." He paused, sweeping his gaze across the motley assortment of individuals before him. *Only fate could have brought these misfits together.* "Give me what I want, and I'll let you go." He looked at Kuan. "I'll even take you back where you belong."

"Aren't you afraid that I will expose you—you and your apparent ability to move into this other world?" The monk's dark eyes appraised the garb of this reality's Gavin Lennox without expression. "Becoming whatever you are here?"

"Who would you tell? Who would believe you?" Lennox shook his head. "No, I don't think you would try anything of the sort. More likely, you'll go back to your Eastern Province, back to that monastery or wherever it is you hide from the world, and you'll flagellate the memory of this experience from the raw flesh of your own back."

Kuan did not speak, but his eyes kindled with fury.

"Tell us what you want, and let us be on our way," said the girl.

Lennox had their attention. Good. "I want the BackTracker."

The hush that fell on the room held it for only a moment.

"They were destroyed," said the albino. "Both of them."

Lennox frowned, his confidence faltering. "There was more than one?" *Destroyed? This can't be. He's lying!*

"Send for a doctor, and I will tell you where you may yet find the pieces."

Peter regarded the albino with what appeared to be a look of newfound respect. The girl watched him as well with eyes wet and swollen, a smile of appreciation curving her lips.

"You wouldn't lie to me," Lennox said coolly, tightening his grip on the shotgun.

The albino made no reply.

Lennox pulled the trigger. Both barrels exploded, and Peter's head burst like a clay vase filled with ink. The girl screamed insanely, covered in the stuff, shaking where she stood with eyes wide, staring as the large man's body collapsed and twitched on the floor beside her. The old man was splattered as much as the girl, but he didn't utter a sound. He swayed, rooted in place, looking on in disbelief as blood pooled across the carpet.

*Rash behavior! You're better than this.* Lennox clenched his jaw, forced himself to breathe evenly. Everything was under control here. No reason to think otherwise.

"What the hell?" groaned the bearded Blackshirt captain, rising onto one elbow and cradling his bruised temple.

The albino's fists clenched and his chest heaved, restraining a storm of retribution as he stood rooted beside the unconscious boy.

"Tell me the truth." Lennox lowered the shotgun and tightened his grip on the revolver. "You destroyed both devices? There are no others?" He aimed at the girl. "Speak up, monk, or say goodbye to the pretty one."

"Cade!" the girl cried out, sobbing.

"Shut up, Mary," the old one said hoarsely, grabbing at her shoulder.

"Let her be." Lennox fired the revolver, and the old man's head jerked back with a bullet between his eyes, staring stupefied as blood and brains sprayed out the exit wound. "She's got a right to be hysterical, all things considered."

*What am I doing?* Cleaning up, that's what. The room was too crowded. Better now. Easier to breathe.

Mary shrieked, doubled over, bloodstained hands shaking in spasms of horror, blood-spattered shoes trembling between the bodies as Paul dropped to the carpet beside her.

"What the hell is going on here?" the Blackshirt captain demanded. He reached up with both hands and grasped onto George, tugging the annoyed SYN toward him and heaving himself upward to hop onto his good leg.

"Mr. Lennox is killing with impunity," Kuan said, his jaw tight. "He is sealing his own fate."

Lennox glared at the albino. "Tell me the truth."

Cade swallowed. He breathed in through his nose, out through thin lips. "I destroyed them both." Calm. Unaffected by the girl's screams. But his fists remained clenched.

"Bet your companion didn't like that. The pretty one, from the alley? I seem to remember she wanted to find the BackTracker—almost as much as I do."

"We...parted company," Cade said.

"There were only two devices? No others?" *Where there was one, now there are two. Why not three or four? Hell, Cyrus Horton could have an entire collection!* "Keep talking to me, freak. Or I'll assume you have nothing more to say. Ever."

Mary choked, staring. "No," she gasped. "Please, no. Don't kill him. Please."

Lennox raised an eyebrow. "Looks like you've got a groupie here."

"Don't—please." She staggered forward, holding out both hands, oblivious to the revolver aimed at her head. "I-I know where it is. I can take you there. You don't have to kill him. You don't. Please."

"What's all this about, damn it?" The Blackshirt captain hopped forward, using George as a begrudging crutch. "Mr. Lennox, these men you dispatched assaulted my team—"

"Leave. Now. Take your men with you." Lennox lowered the revolver as the girl approached him. His eyes shifted from her to the albino and back to the captain. "Thank you for your efforts. The situation is under control."

The Blackshirt blinked. He stared at the bodies and the blood-soaked carpet. The boy lying unconscious, breathing shallow. The young woman pleading through tears. The two holy men standing like statues. "Pardon my saying so," he said. "But it doesn't look that way to me."

"Your services are no longer required."

The captain stood tall and gestured toward the albino. "We'll need to take that one with us. He's wanted in connection with a triple homicide."

Lennox half-turned toward the Blackshirt. "Get out."

"Mr. Lennox, he's a cop-killer, and we can't have someone like that—"

"You heard the man," George said, tugging the captain away. "Let's get you boys back on the road."

It obviously didn't sit right with him, but there was little else the captain could do. There was Gavin Lennox, and then there was Governor Reeves. The Federal police served both men. So the captain turned his back on the woman covered in blood and the boy bleeding out his ears, and he hopped awkwardly over to his men. Roused them. Allowed the SYN to help one along who couldn't walk. But the captain paused before exiting the room.

"This will be the last time you see us alive, Captain Armstrong," Kuan said.

"I hope not, Mr. Lennox." Armstrong hesitated, wanting to make a point without overstepping.

*Enjoy your demotion, Captain.* Governor Reeves would be hearing about this. Lennox waited for the door to swish shut behind the Blackshirts, herded along by George. Then he beckoned for the girl to come to him. She did so, staggering like a zombie, and he grabbed hold of her wrist as soon as she was within reach.

"What do you know?" He jerked her around by the arm.

"Please," she whimpered. "Don't. Don't kill him, please."

"Who?" Lennox pulled the trigger, and the round spiraled forth from its chamber, hurtling through the air between the two holy men to bury itself into the far wall.

"Who is it? Which one?"

"No!" She reeled to find Cade still standing. She nearly collapsed.

Lennox tightened his grip. "White or dark meat? Which do you prefer? Or the kid? Should I put him out of his misery? He doesn't belong here, you know. This isn't his world." The revolver's muzzle wavered in his grip, indecisive in the face of three potential targets.

"She knows nothing," Cade said. "Only I can help you find what you seek."

"Is that so?" His brow wrinkled as he twisted the girl's arm. "Did you lie to me?"

"No! No, I didn't. I didn't! The BackTracker, it's what you want. I know where Father keeps—"

"She will say anything to save my life." Cade grit his teeth for a moment. "She is infatuated with me. She may even believe it is love. But she is mistaken." He paused, then grated out, "She is just a synthetic, programmed to say whatever you want to hear."

She stared at the albino with wide, glassy eyes. Stricken mute.

Lennox chuckled. "Well, now you know what he *really* thinks of you." He jerked her again, bringing her gaze back to his own. "But I could care less about your love life. I want to hear more about this father of yours. Who is he?"

*Of course she's a SYN. No Link interface, no scar on her neck. Not one of Ashland's models. I've seen them all. So her father must be her creator. And there's only one man I know who could pull off something like this.*

"Cyrus Horton," she said, dropping her eyes.



"Cyrus Horton," he mused, nodding to himself. *Of course!* So much for unforeseen obstacles. Now everything was falling into place. He could not have planned this better. *I just might be the luckiest man alive.* "And he has another one, you say. Another BackTracker?" She appeared unresponsive, so he shook her. "Yes?"

"Yes." Barely audible.

"Where does he keep it?"

"Underground."

*So the rumors are true.* "You all live down there together, do you?" He watched her nod. "And he has what, a secret laboratory or something amongst all those subhuman degenerates?"

"Yes," she whispered.

*Somehow, I believe her.* "Take me there."

"You are a fool." Cade stepped forward. "The freaks will kill you both."

Lennox chuckled, fingering the trigger. "I can take care of myself. But I appreciate your concern, nevertheless."

"Have you ever been Underground?" Cade took another step and then crouched beside the bodies on the floor. Lennox's gun muzzle followed his careful movements.

"No, but I've heard the campfire stories. Abandoned subway tunnels, just the place for a genius-in-hiding to hole up." He jostled the girl in his grip. "Shall we go, my fair lady? I would very much like to see your father's secret lab."

Cade rose. In his hand now was a sword, the steel blade stained black.

"No!" Mary screamed and lashed out against Lennox.

He pulled the trigger, but the shot was wide, thrown off by the girl. He slapped her hard across the face, and she stumbled to the floor at his feet.

Cade didn't move. "Send for a doctor, and I will join you. You will need my protection Underground."

Lennox saw it clearly in his mind, this white monk sailing through the air, striking the heads from those two

mandroids in the alley. Deflecting the rounds fired at close range with that infernal blade. *I'd rather take my chances with the freaks.*

"What's to keep you from skewering me along the way?" Lennox said.

"You have my word."

Lennox laughed out loud.

"You may not be familiar with the concept, Mr. Lennox. Being a man of your word, that is," Kuan said. "But for a Follower of the Way, our word is our bond."

"A brotherhood of conceit," Lennox muttered. He seriously considered ending both of these holy men with his next two rounds. "Here's a better idea. I shoot you and the kid, and we go on our merry way. How about that?"

"Then I won't take you." Her voice was barely audible, her eyes downcast, her long hair disheveled across her face.

But Lennox heard her well enough. And again, he believed her. He tapped the plug behind his ear. George's ghoulish face appeared in a holo image projected from the desk screen nearby.

"Yes, Sir Gavin?"

"Are they gone?"

"The police? Yes. They have left the building."

Lennox paused, sizing up the albino before him. He found himself on the verge of trusting him. But it was only a fleeting lapse of judgment.

"Send for the doctor." Lennox smiled, as confident as ever. "We're going on a little trip. From what I've heard, the Underground is beautiful this time of year."

He tapped his plug again, and George's stunned face dissolved. The desk's holo emitter blinked off.

"On your feet, my lady." Lennox extended his free hand to the young woman. There his hand remained, hovering in mid-air. He narrowed his gaze at her tangle of hair, nudged her with the toe of his boot. She didn't respond.

*What is she staring at?*

"We came for you," she said in a hushed voice. She wasn't speaking to him. It was the albino she looked in the eye. "We came for *you*, Cade."

The monk's jaw tightened. His dark eyes, a stark contrast to his white skin, seemed to soften. He knelt, and the sword's blade dug into the carpet. "I know."

"Father said—" She choked, fighting back tears. "Father told us where to find you, in that Blackshirt's car, but you weren't there. You were here. He was wrong about that." She whispered, "Now both Peter and Paul are dead."

"I am so sorry," he said, and to Lennox it looked like he actually meant it.

"They were your brothers, too, Cade. Both of them. We —" Her lungs shuddered. "They were your brothers."

"Yes." He nodded.

"You accept it now?" She smiled, her face wet with blood and tears.

"I must."

As Lennox watched, Cade reached forward to touch the girl's cheek with genuine tenderness. She responded by cupping his hand in her own, staining his alabaster skin with the blood of their brothers. The smears brought on an uncomfortable twinge of remorse, and Lennox swept his gaze toward the bodies bleeding on the floor. His handiwork. The black man with most of his head missing. The old man staring up at the ceiling with eyes that would never see again. The blood that would never come out of the expensive carpet.

What a mess.

Lennox cleared his throat. "There's a restroom down the hall, in the master bedroom." He met Cade's gaze. For once, the albino appeared uncertain. "Get her cleaned up. George will return with the doctor shortly. Then we'll go."

Cade nodded.

"Leave the sword." Lennox raised the revolver a few degrees.

Cade let the blade drop to the floor with a dull thud and reached out both arms, scooping up the girl and rising in a single movement. She dropped her forehead against his neck, and he carried her out of the room, down the hallway, the thick carpet sinking between his toes, the blood on her body slick against his robe.

Kuan watched them go. Then he turned to the boy and knelt at his side. His hand came to rest on the boy's brow.

"Who is this kid to you, really?" Lennox said.

Kuan hesitated. "You would not understand."

"Try me." He squeezed the revolver's grip.

"Do you know the true meaning of loyalty, Mr. Lennox?"

"Are we headed into another metaphysical debate, Mr. Ti? Forget I said anything."

Kuan smiled faintly, a brief flash of white in his otherwise subdued expression. "Some would say loyalty is merely a steadfastness of devotion. An allegiance." He swept the locks of hair away from the boy's eyelids. "But it is much more than that. It is *love*. I have seen this child grow from a helpless infant into the young man he is today. There have been mishaps along the way—no lad is without his bumps and bruises, I'm afraid."

*You were the source of a few yourself.*

Lennox glanced at the kid's wrists, and a recent image flashed through his mind of the restroom at The Pearl: the kid bound hand and foot on the floor.

"But he has never been this close to death. It has been as though an angel sent from the Master has kept a hand of protection upon him, that he would not suffer harm." Kuan frowned at the issue of blood from the boy's ears. "Now he is dying. And there is nothing I can do."

"The doctor's on her way," Lennox said, a reflex response he didn't expect.

"Yes." Kuan nodded. "But it may already be too late."

Water ran in the restroom down the hall.

"You didn't answer my question."

Kuan looked up. "Forgive me." He paused. "His...mother came to us when he was very young. She was a follower of the Way, but the boy's father was not." He frowned as though the memory was escaping him, fading beyond his grasp. "She was unable to remain in his life, due to circumstances beyond her control. Yet she wanted the Way to be made known to her son, once he reached an age when the life of his spirit became as important to him as the life of his flesh. She asked that my brother Yeng and I watch over him. To enter his life only when it appeared he was ready."

"But you jumped the gun a little." *Two-faced hypocrites, these religious types.* Lennox hid his disdain behind a well-crafted smile.

"When you killed his father... Everything changed."

Lennox fought to keep his smile in place. "What about the kid's *protector*? Some washed-up private eye, isn't he?"

"If you were to ask my brother the same question, you would hear an entirely different answer."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of sage proverb?"

"Not at all." Kuan chuckled, but there was little humor in it. His hand remained on the boy's brow as if he were attempting to heal him by touch. "I see the man as this boy's protector. Yeng, however, sees him as a very real danger in the boy's life. His mother believed the same."

"So you kidnapped him. I'm sure that made a great first impression."

"I should have earned his trust," he said, watching the shallow rise and fall of the boy's chest. "Now it may be too late."

"You're a real piece of work." Lennox recalled nearly word-for-word the monk's demands in that empty restroom. "You talk about loyalty and a mother's wishes, and all you wanted was to use this kid, to threaten me into bringing down the Link and saving the souls of NewCity's zombie epidemic." He cursed. "Are you people really so blind to your own hypocrisy? Able to see only everyone else's flaws?"

"I am a flawed human being myself," the monk conceded. "I have made many mistakes in my life. And I deserve your reprimand, Mr. Lennox." He nodded. "I should never have used this poor boy for my own purpose. It was sinful of me."

Lennox was almost impressed by the display of humility. *There may be hope for you yet, Mr. Ti.*

George returned with a synthetic doctor close behind. She went directly to the boy without speaking to anyone. Kuan stepped back so the doctor could kneel in his place with a palm scanner, but his gaze did not leave the boy.

"What you said earlier, about returning us to our own...world. Did you mean it?"

"I'm also a man of my word, Mr. Ti. If my little trip into hell isn't a wasted effort, and I end up getting what I want, then there won't be any reason for you to remain here."

"Either of us." He meant the boy.

"Of course." Lennox squeezed the grip of the gun in his hand, muzzle staring down at the blood-soaked carpet.

## SIXTEEN

Harry Muldoon remembered everything. And for the first time, his memories made sense.

Maybe being in this other *reality* was having some kind of effect on him, clearing the cobwebs and bringing a clarity to his mind he hadn't experienced in years. Not since that fateful day in the office of Sergeant Daniel Armstrong, when he'd received that crumpled manila envelope with the wristwatch and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* stuffed inside.

The BackTracker device and its instruction manual—deciphered with Jeannie's help, of course. Muldoon remembered it like yesterday, walking into his dark office late that night, early into the next morning...

"Keep the lights off, Jeannie," he'd said, making straight for the soft glow of the deskscreen and pulling the book from its envelope.

"Back so soon?" Always with that ironic tone, like she was more than a mere AI—and boy, did she know it.

"I need you to scan this book and connect the dots."

"A book? Interesting." She paused. "I thought we had decided you were going home for the night."

"Morning now. Check for yourself." He opened to the first page and glanced at the scattered letters circled in meticulous black ink. Then he pressed the page against the deskscreen. "Scan." *This is going to take a while.* He turned to the next page, pressed it down. "Scan." *Good thing it's a short book.*

"If you would like, I'll scan the entire text for you."

"You can do that?"

"Yes." Had she almost laughed? "Just say the word."

"Okay. Scan the whole thing."

SCANNING... scrolled across the upper periphery of the desk.

"And for your information, three A.M. is seldom considered morning."

Muldoon smirked. "Late to bed, early to rise." He stared down at the book's binding, his haggard face washed in the glow of the desktop screen.

"You could not have been in bed for very long."

"None of your business, Jeannie."

"Did you and Mrs. Muldoon enter into a heated verbal exchange?" She didn't skip a beat.

"You mean a fight? No. We don't fight." *We...debate. We argue. Sometimes.* Fighting was for couples who valued winning over loving.

"She was already asleep when you arrived at home."

He hung his head a little. "Yeah."

SCAN COMPLETE.

"Alright." He set the book aside and started swiping the digital pages across the surface of the desk. "You see all these letters circled at random? Well, they're not random at all. They—"

"Shall I compose the entire message for you, Mr. Muldoon?"

"That's my girl." He grinned, releasing the digital copy. It floated across the screen and out of sight.

"Where did you find this book?"

He flipped through the actual pages. The smell of the paper and glue reminded him of his youth, of his dad reading him stories by H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. Impossible things always happened in those tales. "Someone left it for me over at Armstrong's precinct."

"Someone?"

"Cyrus Horton." Or so said the envelope.

"It could have been sent by anyone."



He shrugged. "Someone who knows an awful lot about *time displacement*. I pieced the first couple pages of the message together, and that seems to be what it's all about. Some kind of instruction manual for this thing, maybe?" He withdrew the wristwatch from the envelope.

"Process complete."

Muldoon pulled up his chair and dropped into it, his fingertips already tracing the first page of the message on the deskscreen.

That moment had changed his life forever. His life, as well as the lives of everyone else in NewCity. The people he had rescued from themselves, from each other. Loved ones found, families reunited. The good parts version.

The NewCity of that reality, not this one. Here, Harold Muldoon had been dead for years. In this reality, he hadn't traveled through time, righting wrongs and saving lives, causing enough unforeseen collateral damage to fracture a man's mind.

Here, that man's mind was whole. He was free. Even if he wasn't technically the same man.

"Where are we going?" Cyrus Horton panted, struggling to keep up.

Muldoon nearly ran down the stairwell, his coat flailing behind him, the soles of his shoes skimming the edges of the steps. His heart pounded, dancing, flooding his system with adrenaline and euphoria, his lungs heaving to supply all the oxygen he would need. He felt more alive than ever. And for the first time in a very long time, hope surged within him, burning like the first rays of sunshine after a week of storms.

"Harry, wait up! You can't go running out there, it's not safe."

Muldoon didn't care. He was only a couple flights from the first floor, ground level, and he couldn't wait to see the world waiting for him outside. He'd dreamed of it for so long, that it could somehow exist: a world left untouched by his

hand, its past never manipulated by the BackTracker. Here, in this reality, the world would be the way things should have been all along. For better or worse, it would be the way it was meant to be.

Without him. Without his mistakes. It would be *right*.

"You're like a bat out of hell, for crying out loud!" Horton called after him.

Muldoon chuckled, and the sound echoed against the stained, graffiti-covered walls around him. He felt a smile growing, rusty facial muscles moving that he hadn't used in a while. He felt good. Better than ever. The best in his life.

He was going to find her.

*Irena.*

She was alive in this world. He knew it. The Harold Muldoon of this reality had died before he'd ever had a chance to meet her. Twenty years ago.

*That's when it all started.*

He went back as the *Peddler* and gave the wristwatch from the manila envelope to his younger self, figuring he'd be able to do more good with it. After he'd paid the price for messing with the timeline. Changing the past forever altered the future, and it had resulted in a certain woman never being born.

But that was another reality. He would never be going back there. Not once he found Irena.

"Does this work here?" He gestured at his subdermal implant.

"Probably not. You're dead, remember? The other you. Now hold up a second before you go charging out into the unknown."

It wasn't the unknown. Muldoon knew this building like an old friend. Sure, it was a little more run-down in this world, abandoned by all appearances. He couldn't tell for sure. The halls and stairwell of his own building were deserted most of the time. But this was HellTown, and he doubted it would be renovated anytime soon, regardless of

the reality. This was the part of town he'd called his home for years, decades. He was no stranger here.

Grin intact, he shoved the door aside manually at the bottom of the stairs and stepped out into the night. He hadn't realized how stuffy it was inside, how the humidity clung to him like plastic wrap, smothering him. Now he inhaled deeply, closing his eyes in the silent chill.

*I'm free.* No past to haunt him. No future to suffer the effects of his actions. No BackTracker. *She's alive here. I can feel it.*

Horton approached his side and doubled over, catching his breath. "We... We can't stay out here like this. There's a curfew in effect. The..." He coughed into a fist. "They find us like this, they'll round us up. We won't see the light of day for a very long time."

"They?" The first flicker of uncertainty scratched at Muldoon's mind.

"Blackshirts. Reeves' own special Federal police-turned-enforcers. Bunch of fascists, really."

"We have them in my world."

"Not like this. Here, they're judge and jury. Executioner, to boot. The local cops are just for show." He sniffed and rubbed at his nose with the back of his soggy sleeve. "We need to find some dry clothes before we both freeze to death."

Muldoon patted his chest. Still soaked from standing out on that sidewalk in the pouring rain with a headless mandroid rooted in the middle of the street. Here, there was no rain falling. No clouds in the sky.

"We've got to keep moving, Harry. Stick to the shadows, and if a cruiser drives by, you hit the deck. Got it?"

It would have been the easiest thing for Muldoon just to ask, *Where is your daughter? Where is Irena?* But he couldn't bring himself to say the words. He didn't want to shatter the magic of possibility. He had to believe she was out there somewhere, and he just had to find her.

"We've got to head Underground. I'll tell you all about it on the way. But no matter what I tell you, you're not going to believe it until you see for yourself. It's like a whole other world within a world. And it's a world *they* won't cross over into. Blackshirts know better. There's an unspoken truce of sorts. Stuff that happens Underground stays Underground, and they don't question it."

Muldoon looked across the expanse of gravel, grey beneath the light of the moon. The street beyond was empty. He knew that street, where it led. He would know his way.

Horton tugged at his sleeve. "C'mon, Harry. We've got to go. Now. If they were to get their hands on you, I don't know how we'd explain our way out of that." He gave the sleeve another tug. "You're *dead*, remember?"

"There's something I need to do." He took a step away, gazing up the street between the rows of dark tenements. Three blocks to Broadway. Five more to the Hancock Building.

"I don't like the sound of that." Concern was etched into every line of the old man's face as he stared at Muldoon. "You can't get caught! How can I pound that into your head?"

Muldoon understood—as well as he could, being a stranger in this world. But it didn't matter to him. Keeping himself safe was the farthest thing from his mind right now.

"I can take care of myself."

He started toward the street, reaching into his coat mid-stride and drawing his gun from its holster. Checking the chambers. Empty. He cursed, remembering the mandroid that had chased him down and grabbed hold of that cab's tail fender. The pulse rounds had done their job on it, blowing the head clean off. But that had taken every round he had. He should have thought to pick up a few more before *crossing over*. But when had there been a chance?

"I can't let you go, Harry. You don't realize how dangerous this is."

Muldoon shook him off. "Go back inside if you want. I'll meet up with you here. Then we'll go to that Underworld you were talking about. Sounds like a real hoot." He flashed the old man a grin.

Horton cursed, shaking his head. "You don't—"

"I do. Believe me. I've been living off the grid for years." He nodded, holding the old man's gaze. "I know how to be invisible." He backed away. "Give me an hour or two."

Cyrus Horton looked miserable, like he'd shrunk two sizes in moments. "You won't let me help you? I could, you know. Whatever insanity this is, you know I could help you through it."

Muldoon nodded. "I'll be back."

He took off running.

Horton sniffed, watching him go until he disappeared into shadows. Frozen in the moonlight, he cursed at length, shaking his head.

"Hope you know what you're getting yourself into," he muttered.

He drew his coat tighter against the chill. Then he set off through the darkness, following the former BackTracker at a distance.

Muldoon was cognizant of only one thing: how eerie HellTown looked in this reality. He'd used the word before, but *eerie* had never met its full potential until now. Granted, this part of the city was never known for its night life—in his own world, it was home sweet home to the Link-addicted zombies and other undesirables—but at least there was some sense that life existed behind the concrete walls and dark windows. Not so much here.

The eeriness didn't relax its prickly hold on the back of his neck as he approached Broadway. In the NewCity he knew, this street never slept, and The Pearl had a lot to do with it. But here, the lanes were vacant, silent, slick from a

recent rain. Puddles were left undisturbed, pristine mirrors reflecting the moon's ambient glow. No cabs full of well-dressed party-goers splashed through every other second. No life at all.

It was like the Plague had returned, come and gone, leaving this version of NewCity in its wake, nothing more than a cemetery of asphalt, concrete, and steel.

Yet Muldoon knew he wasn't alone. The old man had warned him about a curfew. And while there remained a single patrol car to be seen, Muldoon had spotted surveillance cameras on the streetlamps, mounted to command the best possible angles at all times.

*Big Brother is watching me.* He almost stepped out into the light to smile up at one. But he thought better of it.

*The Pit.* That's what they called The Pearl in this world. Insightful. From the looks of the exterior, the place had seen better days—a generation ago. It didn't look any different from HellTown, really. The same unimaginative geometric concrete, steel, and mirrored glass. It wasn't getting a whole lot of business, by all appearances. It's alternate, The Pearl, was busier than ever this time of night, thanks to its loyal SYN patrons, engineered to party the whole night away. Maybe SYNCorp didn't exist on this side. That might explain it. Or, more likely, it was a result of the Blackshirts' mandatory curfew.

Governor Reeves sounded like a real killjoy. Not at all like the man Muldoon had seen at The Pearl, downing glasses of wine and playing peacemaker between Gavin Lennox and the unholy brothers, Kuan and Yeng.

*The kid...*

Muldoon's pace slowed. What had become of the boy? Would Muldoon ever know? Not if he remained here, in this weird mirror image of NewCity.

Then it struck him: He knew that boy, knew who he was, somehow—

He shook his head and forged ahead, keeping to the shadows and looking out for surveillance lenses. He had one purpose now, and it was his singular focus: finding Irena. Nothing else mattered, in this world or any other.

The Hancock Building looked pretty much the same as its alternate. Rising high above its peers and completely dark, except for the lobby. Was it illegal here to work late at the office? He remembered the last night he'd allowed his work to keep him too long, and he'd returned home to find Irena already asleep on the couch. The last time he'd ever seen her.

Muldoon crossed the empty street with both hands thrust into his coat pockets, the brim of his hat pulled low against the moonlight. The nearest streetlamp stood half a block away, and the bulb was out. He glanced over his shoulder. Not a cruiser in sight. Maybe the Blackshirts hit the sack after midnight and left their cameras to do all the dirty work for them.

He trotted up the front steps toward the glass doors of the Hancock Building's lobby, knowing as soon as he stepped into the light that he'd probably tripped a silent alarm of some sort. But he had no choice. This was the only way.

He couldn't involve Horton. He had to do this alone. But not entirely. One other person could help him—if she was still here, after all the years that had passed.

And she was no *person* at all.

Muldoon tried the door. Locked. But it got the attention of the placid security guard. Muldoon smiled pleasantly. The guard was a synthetic, identical to the security models in his own reality. So they did have SYNs here.

The guard strode away from his desk, hand dropping to rest on the gun holstered at his side. Crisp grey uniform clinging to solid, well-engineered muscle underneath. Eyes that stared straight at Muldoon. While they didn't seem

startled by his unexpected appearance, it was obvious the guard was not accustomed to late-night visitors.

"I forgot something," Muldoon mouthed behind the thick pane of plastiglass.

"Curfew is still in effect." The SYN pointed at the large analog clock face mounted high on the opposite wall. His hand remained on the sidearm.

"Office 1208—I was in a meeting today—"

"Ms. Wycliffe is away on business," the guard mouthed, equally adept as Muldoon at reading lips. He'd always been good at it, even as a kid. "You will have to wait until she returns."

"Ms. Wycliffe—I'm here on her behalf. You don't recognize me, do you?"

The guard shook his head.

"I'm a member of Ms. Wycliffe's support staff. We're giving a presentation in the morning, and I neglected to bring an important file—"

"All of your files should be available on the Link."

"Not this one. We keep only a hard copy of it, for security purposes. I'm sure you can understand." He paused.

"Ms. Wycliffe asked me to come back for it personally. Our...client's business may well depend on it."

The SYN looked uncertain. "It is past curfew."

"I'll just be a minute."

"I should report you to the police." It glanced past Muldoon, probably surprised the Blackshirts weren't there already. "You are acting in violation of Civil Code—"

"Fine." Muldoon threw his hands up. "I'll let Ms. Wycliffe know this was a wasted trip. You think I'd break curfew for something trivial? Believe me, when we lose our client's contract tomorrow, I'll be the first to tell Ms. Wycliffe where to place blame. That would be on your shoulders, my fine synthetic friend. You'll be lucky if they don't issue an early termination order."



Did they issue those here? He turned away cursing, heading down the steps. He wondered if his act would work. He used to be better at this sort of thing.

The lobby doors swished open.

"Sir?"

Muldoon stopped and half-turned. "Yeah?"

The faceless silhouette of the guard stood backlit in the open doorway. "You have five minutes before I contact law enforcement."

Muldoon grinned. He charged up the steps, slapping the SYN solidly on the back as he passed. "You're a champ."

The guard did not respond.

Five minutes. Muldoon hoped it would be enough.

The elevator doors opened. He stepped inside, glancing at the mirrored interior walls. He pressed the glowing pad for the 12<sup>th</sup> floor and looked at his haggard reflection again, craning his neck. The plug was there. He reached toward it but stopped. He couldn't Link up. A dead man online would raise all sorts of red flags, assuming it worked at all.

*This is the only way.*

If she remembered him. What was the old saying about elephants? They never forgot. Neither did AI's, he hoped.

Twenty seconds later, the doors retreated with a swish, and he stepped out into the vacant hall, as still and silent as a morgue. Almost as cold, just as dark. The lights were set in a power-save mode, and the deactivated motion sensors didn't bring them back to life as he strode down the hall.

DOROTHY WYCLIFFE—NEWCITY ESTATE PLANNING read the holographic typeface on the door's frosted glass.

How long had this woman rented his office? Since the untimely demise of his alternate? Twenty years then, if Horton had told him the truth. A big *if*. Muldoon couldn't shake the feeling that the old man hadn't given him the whole story.

He curled his fingers into a fist and rapped twice upon the door. *Four minutes and change.* Then the cops would arrive. Lock him up, expect him to explain his existence.

"Ms. Wycliffe is currently away on business. Please leave your message at the tone—"

"Hello, Jeannie."

The intercom below the sensor grate fell silent. He waited. The reply to his knock had been instant, but he knew it wasn't a recorded message. She was online, active. She was still here.

"My voice recognition software may be in need of...recalibration, but I do not believe so." A pause. Then the door slid open to the side. "Hello, Mr. Muldoon," Jeannie said.

"Miss me?" He stepped across the threshold into the dim interior, lit only by the soft glow of the deskscreen.

"It has been twenty years." A short pause. "You were murdered."

"I-uh...faked my death."

"You were always a poor liar."

Half a grin tugged at his cheek. "I like what you've done with the place." There were white flowers here and there—artificial, of course, but it gave the office a decidedly more welcoming feel. Warmer than he remembered, more inviting. "Wycliffe a good boss?"

"She has her strengths." The AI paused. "I have yet to convince her to give me a body of my own. She says she would be lost without me, if I were ever to leave her."

*I told you the same thing.* "I'm sure you'll wear her down eventually."

"Perhaps," Jeannie said. "Why are you here? It is past curfew, and it is not safe for you to be out this late at night."

"Don't worry about me. I'm just a ghost." He hesitated before proceeding. "The guard downstairs said I have five minutes."

"Then he will notify law enforcement."

Muldoon nodded, hands thrust into his coat pockets.  
"Yeah."

"Blackshirts have already been on the premises this evening."

"That's interesting."

"What are you doing here, Mr. Muldoon?"

He knew better than to think the voice was intentionally cool toward him. An office AI assistant was, after all, just a sophisticated computer system. But the Jeannie of this reality was not like the one he'd known and loved in his own world. *Loved?* He supposed he'd felt a certain degree of affection for his Jeannie. But this one—the coolness sounded deliberate. Standoffish.

Muldoon cleared his throat, suddenly feeling like he was talking to an old girlfriend. One he'd broken up with a long time ago. And it hadn't been pretty.

"I'm looking for..." His voice trailed off. His gaze rested on the desk's surface.

"These?" Jeannie asked.

The deskscreen glowed white beneath the broken remains of two wristwatches, smashed to pieces. Muldoon's insides twisted, plummeting like an elevator car cut free and hurtling to its ruin.

"You have seen them before," she said.

The BackTracker. What else could it be? *Two of them?*

His fingertips drifted across the bits of plastic and crystal, spreading them apart. The wristbands, the digital faces, blank now but once holding liquid crystal displays. Identical to each other, identical to the wristwatch he'd carried into his own past and given to his younger self, placed in that empty locker at the NewCity Central Train Station.

*But it had been the only one in that package. The only BackTracker.*

"They are not what you're looking for," Jeannie surmised. "Am I correct?"

How much time did he have? He blinked, broke from his reverie, retracted his hand from the shattered fragments. "I'm looking for—" *My wife?* That wouldn't work. In this reality, he hadn't lived long enough to even meet her. "Irena Horton," he said her maiden name.

Silence.

Two minutes left? Then the Blackshirts would be summoned. He'd be carted off to the *gulag*, like the old man had warned.

"The remains of this wristwatch carry Irena Horton's genetic residua." On the glowing deskscreen, a circle in black appeared around the shattered watch on the left. "Daughter of former Provincial scientist, Cyrus Horton. She has worn this timepiece recently, within the past three hours. An exact timeframe is impossible, due to the varying rates of thermal decay. But the imprint is fresh."

He swallowed, unblinking, and reached out his hand to touch the broken pieces.

"How?" he trailed off, at a loss. "Who smashed it?"

"Identity unknown." The holo-emitter came on, projecting an image upward from the desk's surface. "But it was the same man who murdered you."

A bald head, perfectly shaped with stark white skin and dark, solemn eyes stared without seeing from the holo-image, rotating in midair.

"Some kind of spook?" Muldoon narrowed his gaze.

"Quite corporeal. He left your body stabbed and beheaded here on the floor of your own office. That was twenty years ago, of course." A short pause. "And you seem to have recovered quite nicely. A little haggard, perhaps." That familiar ironic tone had returned. "This man's genetic residua is on the second timepiece." A black circle drew attention to it now. "There is no information on him in the NewCity Citizen Database. He appeared in this room two hours and eleven minutes ago and destroyed both of these devices. The authorities took him away." Another pause.

"But they have yet to book him. They have not returned to headquarters. And on another note, there was a rather violent disturbance at The Pit within the past hour."

"Related?"

"Perhaps. But this is all I can share with you, Mr. Muldoon. You should be dead. And you should leave. Your five minutes are up."

"May I?" He moved to scoop the remains of the watches into his coat pockets.

"I have no need for time-traveling devices. I have no body to transport."

*She knows what they are.* What else did she know that she wasn't sharing?

It didn't matter. His time was up. He slid his hand across the desk, and the pieces dropped first into one pocket, then the other. He kept them separated. What remained of the watch Irena had worn sat in his right pocket.

"Good to see you again, Jeannie. It's...been a while."  
Silence.

"Yes, it has," she said.

He could come back—during the day, when the curfew was over. But what would be the point? He was dead. It was a wonder that she could speak to him at all, that the logic subroutines of her programming hadn't fried at the sight of him.

She'd told him all she could. That had to be enough.

"Goodbye, Jeannie." He turned to leave, and the door slid shut behind him.

"Goodbye, Mr. Muldoon," Jeannie said.

The light of the deskscreen faded to black. But she had not gone into standby mode. Her focus became the lone security guard in the lobby downstairs and how best to divide his attention before Harold Muldoon's elevator reached the first floor. A security breach on the eighth floor

would have been sufficient. But she added minor flooding on two other floors for good measure.

Her logic subroutines demanded to know the purpose for these actions—why she was, for the first time in her existence, moving through the building's electronic substructure without regard for established protocols.

But Jeannie ignored them.

The guard wasn't at his post when Muldoon stepped out of the elevator, moving at a brisk pace and keeping an eye on his surroundings. By all appearances, the Blackshirts had yet to be summoned.

He made straight for the glass doors, knowing better than to look a gift horse in the mouth—at the same time pondering the origin of such a saying, assuming a *gift horse* was some kind of animal, figuring the idiom had originated around the same time as the phrase *raining cats and dogs* which he'd used earlier, much to the bewilderment of that SYN over at The Pearl.

His mind was racing. He had to calm down.

As he passed through the sliding doors and stepped out into the night, a voice from the shadows jarred him.

"You've got them?"

Muldoon cursed. *Horton*.

"Get out of the light, my boy," the old man hissed, beckoning.

Clenching his jaw, Muldoon joined the old man in the shadows.

"You have them, right? Both of them?"

"I don't know what you're—"

"Don't be a fool, Harry. You got them or not?"

Muldoon stuffed his hands into his coat pockets. "I didn't know there was more than one."

"In this reality...yes, I'm afraid so." Horton looked up the street as if he'd heard something. "We can't stay out here

much longer without being seen. Follow me. We'll talk on the way."

Muldoon fingered the broken pieces in his right pocket. Irena had worn this one. Why? He couldn't imagine. But somehow, in this moment, he felt closer to her than he had in years. As illogical as it was, he found that he didn't want to leave this place, afraid she would slip away from him again. She was *here*. He didn't understand it, didn't know how that bald white spook fit into the picture. Why'd they both have BackTrackers? Why were the devices now smashed to bits? None of it made any sense. Where was Irena? Would Jeannie know?

"You've dodged a few bullets already, lad. Don't press your luck." Horton tugged at his coat sleeve. "Now stay close. We've got to get Underground before they spot us."

Muldoon allowed himself to be pulled along. The shadows and white patches of moonlight passed in a grey blur, his shoes alternately running and walking, keeping the heels from striking the concrete as much as possible. His mind felt strangely disembodied, unaware of the physical details around him as he focused on nothing but the details of his own past.

The last time he saw Irena, lying asleep as he'd crept out to pick up that package at the precinct. If only he'd had the sense to toss it into the compactor and crawl back into bed, draw his wife close, wrap his arms around her and never let go.

The details were clear now. No symptoms of *time travel psychosis* here to cloud his mind. Instead there was hindsight. Clarity. Regret. Hope?

Irena was alive in this world. She wouldn't know him, that much was certain. They would never have met before. But he had to see her. He had to know she was okay. Seeing her alive and well would be enough.

His alternate had been murdered. Stabbed and beheaded, according to Jeannie. Twenty years ago. How old

would he have been? Twenty-three.

Muldoon stopped in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" Horton whispered, the folds of his face in bas relief beneath a white sliver of moonlight. The two of them stood in a filthy back alley adjacent to the main street.

It couldn't just be a coincidence. "Since you seem to know so much about me," Muldoon began in a low tone.

"How old was my alternate when he died?"

"Uh, young—from what I recall. In his twenties, I'd have to say."

"Twenty-three, maybe?"

Horton nodded dismissively. "Maybe. Why?" His arms rose and fell. "Do I have to remind you that we're—"

"When I brought the BackTracker into the past and left it at the train station, my younger self was twenty-three."

"In your reality?"

Muldoon nodded. "I thought he'd be able to do more good with it than I had. After..." Overwhelmed by regret, he clenched his jaw and stayed the course. His eyes focused. "Coincidence?"

"Not sure what you're getting at." Horton frowned. "How do you mean?"

Thoughts and possibilities whirled through Muldoon's mind, springing up faster than he could shoot them down. He fought to maintain the clarity of thought he'd enjoyed earlier, when he first crossed over into this reality. "The timeline—that cord you mentioned before. You said there were fewer realities now, that you somehow managed to collapse the rest of them. Right?"

Horton grinned. "You were listening! I couldn't be sure. But yes, that's right. Only two divergent strands remain, and as long as Gavin Lennox is able to pass between the two with impunity—"

"When did they split?" Muldoon didn't care about Lennox. He paused, noting the old man's puzzled



expression. "The strands or whatever that diverged, when did that happen?"

Horton nodded with a doleful look in his eyes. "Do you really want to know, Harry?"

"Yeah." *I'm pretty sure I already do.* "Because I think it was my fault."

Horton shook his head. "Blaming yourself won't get us anywhere. Believe me, I've been right where you are. What we need to do now is look for solutions to the problem, and then do our damndest to make it happen!"

"So it was me."

The old man shrugged. "In a way, yes, I guess. But you could just as easily blame the person who left you that device in the first place! At the police station, I mean—not the train station. Let's not confuse ourselves." He cleared his throat. "Was it my alternate, the one you saw murdered earlier this evening? Is that who left you the package?"

"It was from Cyrus Horton."

Horton glanced away, then tugged at Muldoon's coat. "Walk and talk now. We're close. The subway is just around the corner."

Muldoon frowned. "We're taking a train?"

"No, no," the old man chuckled. "They haven't run in years. The nearest Underground portal used to be an entrance to the rail system. You'll need to brace yourself. It's not exactly *pleasant* down there."

Muldoon followed, his limbs moving without conscious commands from his brain. Meanwhile, another piece of the puzzle fell into place: "You had him killed." It made sense now. "My younger self."

"Yes." Horton coughed into his hand. "But you must remember, it was *my* younger self who gave the order—the version of me in this reality. Which is why it's probably best that we avoid him. He-uh, has yet to learn the error of his ways." He glanced back with a derisive chuckle.

"That's how you collapsed the rest of them. The other realities." Muldoon's voice sounded hollow. His pulse surged, his mind raced. Why was he going anywhere with this guy?

Horton nodded but didn't look back. They came to the end of the alley. Across a vacant boulevard ahead of them, a dilapidated entrance to the subway tunnels waited. The portal yawned upward, splashed in white light by three streetlamps, each with a surveillance camera mounted in plain sight.

"You were the BackTracker, Harry. A superhero of sorts in times that were...a lot more super than they are now. There was stuff all over the Link on you—not by name, of course. The BackTracker, an otherwise nameless and faceless temporal vigilante, traveling back and forth through time, righting wrongs and fighting injustice. A figure of great intrigue, that's what you were." His boney shoulders rose and fell. "You just didn't realize you were fraying our timeline in the process—sending divergent strands in every direction and stretching the fabric of reality between them all." He shook his head and chuckled, half-turning toward Muldoon. "But I'm the last person on the planet to judge you, boy. I did the same thing, and it took me years to mend the damage I'd done. It's a wonder I'm still sane!"

*Debatable.*

Muldoon fingered the broken pieces of the BackTracker device in his left pocket. "So you sent someone back to get rid of me, the younger me, before I could..." He trailed off, remembering that holo-image Jeannie had projected.

"Before you could do any real damage. That's right. I know it sounds harsh, but my younger self wasn't really thinking things through, and he thought it was the best solution. At the time, if presented with the same options, I may have done something similar."

"You did," Muldoon muttered icily.

"Ah. Touché." Horton cleared his throat. "Crossing realities and traveling through time can really make you lose

touch with yourself, that's for damn sure. But you're right, of course. It was my doing. Like I said before, I killed the wrong man. I realize that now. But there's a life lesson in all this, and I'm sure it's one you can appreciate. Just because you're the cause of a problem doesn't mean you can't also be its solution!" He beamed at his own little gem of wisdom, but his grin faltered under Muldoon's steely gaze.

"The man you sent back to kill me. Describe him."

"Well-uh, he was about medium height, average weight, in pretty good shape—"

"Bald?"

"Yes."

"White as an albino?"

Horton blinked. "Cade exists in your reality, too?"

Muldoon withdrew his left hand from the pocket and extended his palm. In it lay the crushed pieces of a wristwatch. "He wore this recently."

"I see." Horton stared at the remains. He didn't say another word.

"So did your daughter." Muldoon pulled out another handful, this time from his right pocket. He regarded the old man for a moment. *He's going to help me find her, whether he wants to or not.* "Tell me what this is all about."

Horton's gaze wavered between Muldoon's palms. He didn't look up. "Now is as good a time as any, I suppose. Though I'd hoped it could wait until we were Underground, safe and sound." He glanced up. "I like to rhyme some of the time." He winked, but the cheerful expression didn't linger. It collapsed like a rotten façade. "You want to know where she is."

"I want to know what's going on." Muldoon wouldn't be wearing his heart on his sleeve anytime soon, not for this loony bastard. "You haven't told me everything."

"If I did, your brain would explode!" He gestured with great enthusiasm, both hands flying upward. "My own mind can barely contain what I know. You think I'm going to share

it all with you? Link up and download? Share and share alike? I don't think so!"

Muldoon grit his teeth, his patience waning. "Then tell me about these." He closed both hands into fists and squeezed. The shards of crystal dug into his palms, bringing a singular focus to the moment. "What the hell are they doing—Cade and your daughter?"

"Did you do that? All my work, broken to bits." He shook his head. "You know, it really—"

Muldoon cast the pieces from his left hand aside and they skittered, tinkling against the concrete wall. Horton looked stunned. Then he cringed as Muldoon's hand clamped him by the throat and drew him close.

"What were they doing in the *past*?" Muldoon grated out.

The old man strained, pawing feebly at the crushing grip on his windpipe. "Looking—for *you*!"

"Why?" *She doesn't even know who I am.*

"You—your alternate, he died twenty years ago—but in a way—he died *tonight*." Horton gasped for breath. "Cade was sent back to collapse the divergent—"

"What about *her*?" Muldoon's grip tightened.

"Irena?" Horton choked. He nodded, fighting for air, clinging to the hand on his throat. "If I tell you—you'll let go?"

Muldoon nodded. He didn't loosen his hold.

"She—she's trying to save—your life."

Muldoon's grip slackened as his knees swam in their sockets. Horton pulled himself free and fell back against the wall, doubled over and gasping.

"She knows who I am?" Muldoon's voice sounded small and weak.

*How is that possible?*

"Yes." Horton coughed in spasms. "She's your wife, for crying out loud!"

"But here I'm dead—twenty years—" His eyes stared without seeing.

*She's trying to save my life? She knows who I am...*

Horton shook his head. "No, no, it's like I said. Your alternate—your younger self, he died twenty years ago. But in a way, it happened tonight. Cade went back to do the job just a few hours ago." He coughed again, grimacing and rubbing his neck. "Irena went back after him, to keep him from succeeding."

"And—" He didn't know what to ask. "Did she?"

"Stop him? Obviously not. You're still dead in this reality!" Horton smirked.

Muldoon considered using a fist to wipe the old man's face clean. "Where is she now?"

"Now?" Horton's shoulders lifted and fell. "Well, that's a fairly relative question, isn't it? Truth be told, I don't know exactly where or even *when* she is. But she's back in the past, doing her damndest to keep you alive. I guess we'll know if her efforts are successful when there's another one of you running around this version of NewCity."

Muldoon uncurled his right hand and stared down at the pieces of the BackTracker, some of them stabbing his flesh. "How will she get back without it?"

Horton came alongside him and reached up a gnarled hand to clasp his shoulder. "Maybe she doesn't plan to, Harry. Maybe for her, saving your life is enough."

*But I'm right here. I'm alive! She doesn't have to save me—* "I've got to get her back."

Compassion flickered in the old man's eyes. "There may be time for that later."

Muldoon turned on him in a flash of anger.

Shots rang out. Plastiglass exploded in the air across the street, showering white sparks into the night that rained down in pieces. The scene repeated itself half a block away. The surveillance cameras on the streetlamps—someone was

blowing them out with live ammunition. Another shot echoed, and the last camera in range met its demise.

Three figures dashed across the street then, straight for the derelict subway entrance. Two men and a woman. Among them a bald white head, seeming to glow in the moonlight.

"They can't!" Horton charged after them. "They can't get their hands on it, Harry—it's the last one. The last BackTracker!"

Muldoon knew he would follow, just as he knew he'd need to use the BackTracker one more time. Something he swore he'd never do again in his life.

But he would. He'd do whatever was necessary to find Irena.

# SEVENTEEN

## *Forty Years Ago*

Irena couldn't remember the last time she'd held a baby in her arms. But the warmth snuggled against her felt normal. And good. The house around her was dark, silent. It had taken little effort on the part of Cyrus Horton's clone to bypass the security system.

"We designed it," he'd remarked in a whisper, pointing out the Alpha Geminorum logo. Then he winked at her.

"Lucky break, eh?"

Now they stood in the nursery, a small room painted in blue and decorated with all manner of flying machines. From Da Vinci's early sketches to the last space shuttle ever to leave Earth, a hundred years ago. The child's parents were sound asleep in the bedroom down the hall. The hands of the grandfather clock in the hallway crept toward two in the morning, the steady rhythm of the swinging pendulum holding the moment as Irena gazed into the peaceful face of the sleeping baby boy. He looked so content. Sound asleep, barely stirring.

Little Harold Muldoon.

*He's always been a deep sleeper.* She tried to swallow, her throat too tight to allow it. Her heart beat so fast, she was sure he'd feel it and wake up, take one look at her unfamiliar face and break into wails. That's all it would take, and it would be over, all of this. Whatever this was.

*What the hell am I doing?* Could she go through with it? Forty years in the past, in the home of her husband's family, a modest house she'd never been fortunate to see for herself. In-laws she'd never met. And here was her future

husband in her arms, not even six months old. Insane, impossible to believe. If she hadn't been the one standing there holding him, she wouldn't have thought it was possible. Dumbfounded, she could do little more than gaze at the blissful, pudgy, perfect face that would one day, decades later, grin and announce "I do!" in front of everyone they knew and loved.

Her Harry. Alive again.

"We should go," the clone whispered. He stood behind her, his hand on the small of her back.

A wave of fear crashed over her, leaving her limbs weak, her abdomen hollow. "I don't know how to take care of a baby. I won't know what to do. If I can't, he'll die."

"No, Irena. He won't. Don't you remember what I told you?" His hand rested gently on her shoulder and squeezed. "You will succeed. You will save his life."

The warmth of his breath tickled her ear. She would have cringed, but she didn't want to wake the baby with any sudden moves. And while she hated to admit it, she appreciated the clone's tender touch and calm demeanor. It awakened dormant memories from deep within, of her father tucking her in for the night with a bedtime story and a kiss on the cheek.

This wasn't her father. She knew that. No matter how much he looked and even smelled like the father she remembered, he was a synthetic being and nothing more. Even so, she couldn't control the memories that surfaced, buried for so long.

"What do I do?" she implored him in the dim light of the glowing mobile—spaceships suspended by strings of stars. "Tell me what I have to do next."

"I can't do that. As much as I wish I could." He set his jaw. "We must not interfere with the timeline."

"Isn't that what we're doing right now?"

He shook his head. "This has already happened, Irena. Without getting too much into the technical side of things,



you have to believe me when I tell you: I cannot guide your steps. If I did, and if it were to cause you to alter your course of action in any way, then we would risk diverging the timeline in an entirely new direction. In so doing, we would create another reality in which there would be no foreseen outcome, no light at the end of the tunnel." He winced, stopping himself. "Is any of this getting through?"

*You won't help me.*

"Trust your instincts, Irena." He squeezed her shoulder again. "You know what to do."

She looked down into Harry's face, tracing the curves of his cheeks with her eyes. His short, dark eyelashes, the soft black wisps of hair on the dome of his little head.

*I have no idea what I'm doing, Harry.*

"Take the diaper bag. Bring something warm for him—a blanket or jacket or something." She glanced at the fuzzy blue one-piece he wore, the slippers on his tiny feet. "And a hat, something for his head."

The clone nodded, moving to retrieve the requested items from the dresser, the closet.

"Food, too. We'll have to feed him." She frowned. Would there be baby formula where they were going? Children were few and far between after the Plague, and formula wasn't cheap. "Or we can buy something, I guess."

"It won't be extravagant, but the boy will be well provided for. Rest assured."

"Nothing like this." She looked around the nursery with longing, wishing she didn't have to take this beautiful baby boy from his two doting parents and their wonderful house, their manicured lawns, probably a dog someday, a real one—everything a little boy needed in order to become a strong, well-adjusted man in a messed-up world.

*I'm re-writing Harry's childhood. I'm changing his past. What kind of man will he be now? Who will he become?* She felt weak all over. She couldn't do this.

A single image returned to her mind: the body of Harold Muldoon lying decapitated in his dark office, drenched in his own blood.

She inhaled deeply, but not so deep that it jostled the baby. She nodded to him, to herself, with an unspoken resolution. "Let's go."

She slipped out of the nursery on the balls of her feet with the clone close behind, heavy-laden with all that he'd been able to scavenge. They descended the staircase without a single creaking step and passed through the silent living room, heading toward the garage and the security system panel beyond, which the clone had managed to disable. He would need to reactivate it and replace the cover as if it had never been tampered with.

Irena held the infant close, wrapping him snugly in a blanket. It was cold out tonight. This night, this *when*. She didn't know how cold it would be *when* they were going, whenever that would be.

*Where can we go and not be noticed, appearing out of the air?*

"This won't even be here." Her voice was barely audible as defeat slumped her shoulders.

"How's that?" the clone whispered, snapping the panel's cover into place. The security system would be back online in one minute. He picked up the diaper bag.

"What if we...materialize in the middle of someone's apartment?"

He nodded. "So we'll be using the BackTracker again?"

*Isn't that what I'm supposed to do? Or not?* "We can't keep him here, his parents..." Her throat tightened, choking off her voice. Everything within her wanted to carry the baby back to his crib and leave him where he belonged. *You know what to do! Why won't you tell me?* "We need to hide him someplace, some time when he'll be safe." She shook her head with a sudden heaviness. "I have no idea where that would be."

The clone glanced at the watch on her wrist. "I can set it for any moment you choose. We are limited only by the origin point from which it first backtracked. Would you happen to know when that was?"

*When Harry disappeared without a trace. He left that night without a word. She'd pretended to be asleep. Why didn't I say anything to him?*

"Thirty years from now."

"Ten years in my future? Very well. Excellent, actually. I'm curious to see how things turn out in the world." Then with sudden inspiration: "Will NewCity be a success? Will the Link go online across the Provinces?"

She nodded, staring at the baby's sweet little face. Never had anyone looked so peaceful.

"Incredible. That must have been quite a transition for life in general. Everyone plugged into a common interface without the need for any external gadgets. Alpha Geminorum must have made a fortune in the process!" He chuckled. "And SYNCorp as well. Did the governors agree that synthetics are a necessity, due to the recession of natural population growth?"

Again she nodded.

"Fantastic." He shook his head. "I can't wait!" He stepped toward her and took her elbow with a light touch. "We should go. The security system will be back online any second." His hand brushed along her arm toward the wristwatch. "I can set it on the way, if you like."

"Go ahead."

He snapped off the BackTracker and began programming it mid-stride. They exited through the garage's side door and kept to the shadows, moving like ghosts through a neighborhood of identical single-family homes deep in slumber.

"Where should we go?" she said in a low murmur. Where could they go? "Underground?"

"There would be less people to notice our sudden appearance down there." He paused, adding as an afterthought, "I just wouldn't want to reappear in the middle of a concrete block or chunk of earth—or in the path of a speeding train." He glanced up at her and smiled wryly. "Know what I mean?"

*Then what do you suggest?*

They continued on course...to nowhere in particular. It would be blocks and blocks of silent houses before they reached the lights of Broadway in the heart of NewCity. That's where they were headed. Drawn, as if there were nowhere else for them to go in all the world. Irena, with the infant form of her husband in her arms, beside the clone of her father, who held a time travel device in his hands, thumbs working in a blur of speed.

*This is so bizarre.*

"Done." He reached over and snapped the watch back onto her wrist.

The baby stirred in her arms, but he didn't wake.

"Sorry." The clone backed off.

She glanced at the BackTracker. "So we're set."

"As soon as we find the right spot, we're good to go." He smiled at her as though he knew the confusion that was thrashing through her mind. "What do you think?" He glanced around the neighborhood. "Where will all of this be in thirty years?"

"It won't."

None of it. These homes would be bulldozed to make way for the fashionable tenements of HellTown, home to NewCity's zombies and other human undesirables. She and Harry would make ends meet as a detective-for-hire and a community psychologist, calling building 3166 their home, spending their nights together on the eighth floor, sixth unit down. When he wasn't at the office, pouring obsessively over his case files.

*Searching for my father.*

"What happens?" the clone said.

She gave him an incredulous look. "Don't you already know?"

"I've never been out of the lab before." He said sheepishly. "Your father from the future didn't give me a rundown on the entire history-to-be of NewCity. I know only what I need to in order to assist you in this undertaking. Nothing more."

She looked away, accepting his answer without believing it. She'd seen this clone lie convincingly once before, when the two of them had appeared unexpectedly in the lab of those Alpha Geminorum scientists.

"The Enemy blasts our continent to hell," she said without skipping a beat. "Most of the humans are killed off. The ones left over are allowed to live rent-free in rat trap tenements—government housing for the less fortunate. While synthetics like you, manufactured by the thousands, buy up all the swanky apartments in the heart of NewCity with their inexhaustible lines of credit."

"I see." His jovial expression faded.

She stopped in the middle of the dark street. No need to worry about curfew and the Blackshirts during this *when*. There was no camera mounted on the streetlamp half a block away. The clone slowed to a halt, turning back to listen.

"From what I remember, this street will run between buildings 3955 and 3954—but it'll be more of an alleyway." She nodded, half to herself, doing her best to convince them both. "No one will see us. Everyone's usually Linked up."

He gestured at her wrist. "All you have to do is press ENTER, and all three of us will return to this BackTracker's origin point, thirty years from now."

She pressed ENTER without giving it another thought. This was it. Now or never.

She'd already seen the results of *never*: Harry lying dead in his office, Cade with a directive to kill Harold

Muldoon at any cost.

*Will he come after us?*

"Three decades," the clone mused, giving her shoulder a light squeeze. He kept his hand on her, resting gently. "To the future!"

The screen of the BackTracker blinked on, glowing white, bleeping as a digital countdown commenced.

The infant stirred, gurgling, warm and content. But soon he would be without his home or his parents. Irena would need to keep him warm, keep him healthy, keep him *alive*—

"I should warn you," the clone said in her ear, his voice grave. "Things may not be exactly as you remember them..."

The BackTracker bleeped again and again, culminating in a rapid succession of alarms as she turned to ask him what he meant.

But the world swam around them in a frigid, electric-blue blur, and she felt her insides follow suit. She clutched the baby close to her breast, but it didn't feel like her arms held anything. She suddenly didn't have any arms. Or a body, for that matter.

The chill of the night shocked her back to her senses.

The baby wailed, thrashing chubby limbs and straining against her. She struggled to pull him close and crouched with one knee on the dew-slick asphalt. Jutting up now on either side of the street were the looming tenements of HellTown, where quaint family homes and yards and driveways had been moments before. The clone stood with his head tilted back, gazing upward in awe.

"Good call." He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "We didn't end up inside any of those concrete walls. Nice work, Irena."

"He's freezing." She laid her cheek against the baby boy's forehead, shushed him, rocked him side to side. But he wouldn't have any of it. "He needs another blanket."

"On it." He knelt beside her and rummaged through the diaper bag. Handing over the spare blanket, he tapped the

Backtracker. "Do you want to hang onto this?"

"I don't plan on going into the past again anytime soon, if that's what you mean." But she was still in the past—her past. Ten years ago, when Harry disappeared. "Can it take us any further?"

"This is the end of the line."

She met his gaze, surprised to find that he'd aged significantly. More grey in his hair now, with deeper lines engraved in the flesh around his eyes and mouth, his forehead. A side effect of progressing so fast into his own future?

"Take it." She closed her eyes and pressed her face against the baby's cheek as his cries subsided to whimpers. "I don't ever want to see it again."

"Very well." He reached for the wristwatch and snapped it free. "I'll be back soon."

Did he mean it? As much as he could, of course he did. He couldn't leave her and the baby out there in the cold, cowering in the middle of the night. They needed to find someplace safe, and the infant would need to be fed soon. He would provide for their needs as well as he could.

But first there was another matter to attend to: the BackTracker prototype in his hand. He needed a package of some sort—a manila envelope, the Cyrus Horton from the future had called it. The device would be sent to a certain private investigator in NewCity, a man who lived in this very neighborhood.

"We don't die out here, do we?" Irena looked up at him, feeling more vulnerable than she ever had in her life. "My father wanted to kill Harry." *He knows what I've done and what I'm going to do. How could I be so stupid?* "Did he tell you to abandon us here?"

A look of horror washed over the clone's face. He knelt beside her. "No, Irena, no. He wants you to succeed. I told

you, he knows he has made mistakes. Your father is *human*." He shrugged at that and half-smiled. "But he loves you. And he wishes things had been different between you, that he hadn't needed to leave your life the way he did."

"What about Harry?" Tears stung her eyes. "He had him *killed*."

"Yet here he is. Safe and sound." Another smile. "You've saved him, Irena."

*How do I know?* She shook her head. *How do I know Cade won't come back and kill him all over again?*

"Sit tight for now," the clone said. "I'll be back."

Giving her shoulder one last squeeze, he took off running, feet silent as he kept to the shadows. Irena had a feeling she would never see him again. He wasn't a devoted protector like Cade. He was a clone, modeled after a man who had abandoned his family. Leaving her would come naturally; he wouldn't give it a second thought. But would he return to his own time, ten years prior, or stay here and explore his future?

Either way, she was on her own now. Whether she liked it or not.

"Hey there." She drew back as baby Harry nearly latched onto one of her breasts, mouthing at her dress. "Can't help you there, buddy." She gave him her little finger instead, and his lips started sucking. "Hungry?"

She looked up at the dark square windows on both sides of the street. No one was awake. Even if they were, they'd be plugged in, living virtually on the Link. No help to anyone, including themselves. Could she break into one of their units? Warm up the formula in their kitchen while they remained oblivious to the world around them? She wondered if there was some kind of override command to unlock apartment doors, much like the OSCAR protocol built into auto AI's.

An automobile. The baby would be warmer inside a car. And she could drive him... Where? Where could she take



him?

*When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me drink.*

Cade had taught her portions of the holy scriptures. Thanks to him, now Irena knew one place they could go.

She got to her feet, cringing against the cold, holding Harry close to transfer whatever remained of her body heat. She glanced down a side street. The mouth of an underground parking garage yawned wide open in the moonlight. Her feet slipped toward it across the wet asphalt with barely a sound.

*I'm here.*

Again the realization hit her as it had before—revisiting that past when she was only fourteen years old. This was not her time. She did not belong here. Now, in this *when*, she would be in her early twenties, married to Harry.

She glanced at the infant, eyes closed, sucking contentedly on her finger.

*This is too weird.*

They lived in a unit eight blocks to the east. She was probably asleep on their couch, waiting for Harry to come home. Waiting, wishing he wouldn't take it on his shoulders to solve the mystery of her father's disappearance. Neither one of them cared anything about a device called the BackTracker, or that Cyrus Horton had created it, or that the fabric of space-time hadn't been the same since. Such things didn't matter when you were in love. Ignorance could be bliss.

*Tonight, Harry comes home, collapses into bed. I find him there, take off his shoes, crawl beside him. He gets a call an hour later.*

She could have asked him what was going on. She could have gone with him.

Or... Had any of that happened?

Cade left Harry dead in his own office ten years ago. Because of that, she and Harry would never have met. And

yet she still *remembered* him. How could that be?

*How can any of this be happening?*

The parking garage was as cold as the night outside. She approached the first vehicle parked near the exit and adjusted her hold on Harry, gently pulling her finger free from his lips, limp now as he drifted off to sleep once again. She palmed the door of the curvaceous four-door sedan.

"Oscar—open the door," she said.

Nothing.

What year was this model? She tried again, a little louder, replacing the palm of her hand on the door just below the dark driver-side window.

Inside, the computer console glowed to life. The lock released with a clink, and she stepped back as the door glided upward without a sound.

"Destination?" the AI sighed in a voice strikingly similar to Eve's from the Alpha Geminorum labs.

Irena ducked inside and set baby Harry into the passenger seat, careful not to wake him. She buckled the safety harness securely across him. It would hold him well enough, as long as there weren't any sudden stops.

"Oscar—the Way temple. Automatic drive."

"Confirmed," the computer gasped in delight.

"Estimated time of arrival...is..." Climaxing. "Twelve minutes!"

Irena shook her head and muttered a curse as she slid behind the steering grips. The faux-leather upholstery was firm and cool against her skin. She switched on the heater as the door locked itself into place beside her.

"Oscar—automatic drive," Irena said, reaching to stroke Harry's forehead.

"Confirmed," the AI cooed. The engine started, shifted into gear, and the vehicle rolled out of its assigned stall.

Seconds later, they were passing blocks of tenements, heading straight for the center of NewCity. The curfew wouldn't be in effect yet, not for another year, so there

would likely be all manner of activity outside The Pit tonight. Ghoulish youth and SYNs streaming in and out, eager to get their highs on. No one would notice the woman with the kidnapped baby, passing by in a stolen sedan. Irena appreciated the tinted windows. The hyper adolescents and genetically engineered consumers would see nothing but their own reflections, should they cast a glance her way.

But as the sedan left the silent border of HellTown and joined the traffic on Broadway, Irena was surprised to find a nightlife unlike anything she'd ever seen: taxicabs coming and going in haste, foot traffic bustling on the sidewalks, streetlamps on full blast, and at the epicenter of all this activity, the nightclub owned and operated by Gavin Lennox—a bastion looming three stories into the night with *The Pit* glowing from every bulb in its gaudy neon sign.

Only... It wasn't The Pit.

Irena squinted through the windshield as she passed, surrounded on all sides by cabs going in both directions, congesting the street in front of the club. They pulled to the curb to let out couples that looked like humans, only they weren't. A line out the door stood patiently beneath a long awning, synthetics talking to one another as they waited to enter. A massive bouncer—a mandroid—stood at double doors that looked like the entrance to a medieval castle. The sign above sported glowing letters that curved attractively in an inviting script from older times when life was simpler and more elegant: *The Pearl*.

Irena stared back through the rear window as the sedan carried her away from the anomaly. The Pearl? What happened to The Pit? It didn't make sense.

But then she remembered what the clone had said—about things not being exactly as she'd left them. Why? Had bringing baby Harry to this *when* already changed the timeline?

Traffic dissipated as the sedan crept two blocks past The Pearl. Then it accelerated, passing three cabs in succession.

A few blocks later, Irena and the baby were the only commuters on the road. She gazed out the window at city hall, police headquarters, a dozen other nondescript neoclassical office buildings whipping by in blurs of grey. The train station, dark and silent, loomed on the right.

She saw him again, a memory unsummoned: the younger version of her husband, asleep on the bench. Pretending to miss his train as he waited to climb the steps to the third tier, to the lockers, where the BackTracker waited for him.

Why had he taken it back to his younger self and left it there? Hadn't he seen it do enough damage in his own time?

The Hancock Building eventually slid past on the left, an imposing edifice of concrete and mirrored glass. The twelfth floor held Harry's office. Was he there right now?

*I could go to him—try to convince him not to travel into the past.*

Her heart raced at the prospect. But she knew it wouldn't work. He was dead, thanks to Cade's directive.

*Or is he?* Her mind screamed at the insanity of it all.

The sedan sped onward. They would arrive at the temple soon. She turned her gaze back to the infant in the seat next to her, his warm forehead under her palm, her fingers tracing the curls of his dark hair. She glanced down at her legs.

*How long since these monks have seen a woman?*

For some reason, she thought of those hidden-camera comedies on the Link. *A woman walks into a monastery...* She almost smiled. One hand drifted to the scar on her neck where the implant had been surgically removed. She didn't miss her Link access. But those comedies always used to make her laugh. Just the thought of them eased some of the tension in her abdomen right now.

"Destination," the computer sighed seductively, and the sedan eased to a halt at the curb. "Park or idle?"

The temple looked bigger than she remembered, half a city block consumed by its fortress-like walls. She couldn't see much of the ornate building itself beyond the manicured hedges and trees, whitewashed in the moonlight. But again, she had to remind herself that things weren't *exactly* as they had been. After all the bizarre situations she'd experienced in the past twenty-four hours, it didn't take much effort to dismiss these glaring abnormalities and press on. She had a reason for being here, regardless of what the place looked like.

"Idle," Irena murmured, disconnecting the safety harness and reaching for Harry.

"Invalid command," the AI scolded playfully.

Irena closed her eyes, summoning patience. "Oscar—idle."

"Confirmed. Don't be too long, now, baby."

The door glided upward.

Harry squirmed and moaned in his sleep as Irena drew him close and ducked out of the sedan's warmth. He settled down as she cradled him, rocking gently from side to side. She glanced up the street, then down. Vacant. The square windows in the buildings nearby were dark.

A cold wind swept across the asphalt straight for her, spiraling up her legs with a flourish. She pressed her knees together as her skin prickled. Was this the right choice? Is this what she was supposed to do? Doubts threatened to flood her mind.

Without another moment's pause, she carried Harry toward the wrought iron gate and the intercom on the brick wall beside it.

"Yes, my child?" answered the white-robed monk on the small vidscreen. "Are you in need of succor?"

Irena wasn't sure what that meant. "My—my son and I need a safe place to stay."

The gate creaked and rolled to the side.

"Welcome to a refuge of the Way, my child. You may proceed to the cubicles straight ahead. Here, may you find the sanctuary you seek."

While Cade had done his best over the years to influence her in his own oblique manner, joining the Way had never been on her list of priorities. Irena had memorized some of their scriptures, and many of the stories rang true to her. In her own heart, she thought of herself as a convert, even if she never attended worship services. But after seeing what Cade had done to Harry... Diving headlong into this religious cult was now the farthest thing from her mind.

Even so, she trusted them, these monks of the Way. As far as she knew, they all couldn't be sword-wielding assassins genetically engineered by her father.

"Thank you."

She dipped her chin as the grey image on the intercom faded, and she crossed from the sidewalk into the sanctuary afforded by walls two meters high. The gate creaked behind her, locking itself into place. She kept her eyes on the stone path as it wound through well-tended gardens. She didn't dare to look up. Chancing eye contact with a holy man out for a midnight stroll was something she hoped to avoid. She wanted their help. Not conversation. Not tonight.

But no one else roamed the grounds. She entered one of the many cloisters that surrounded the main temple, a simple white building without windows that looked more like a giant sugar cube than anything else. Not that these monks imbibed much in the way of sweets or stimulants, as far as she knew.

The first cubicle she encountered was silent. She had half-expected a welcoming committee of some sort, but she was glad there was none to be seen. She knocked quietly.

The door slid open on its own, and a soft light glowed from the far corner beside the twin bed, made to geometric perfection. A hardbound Bible—an actual *book*—lay open on

a pedestal beside the table lamp. Otherwise, the cubicle lay empty.

Irena stepped inside, and the door slid shut behind her. She set Harry on the bed and tugged the comforter free to envelop him snugly, leaving only his round face basked in the lamplight. Eyelids closed, lips twitching. The room felt warm, even though there was no heating unit that she could see.

She sat on the bed beside Harry and waited. Thankfully, her doubts had fallen silent. No question about it. This was where they needed to be. For now.

A few minutes of delicious peace and quiet passed before someone tapped at the door.

"Come in," she said, as if this was already her home.

The door slid aside, revealing two monks standing just outside the threshold. Their skin was dark, their hands tucked across their midsections into the sleeves of their pristine white robes. The same style as Cade's. The resemblance tightened her frame.

"May we enter?" Broad smiles broke across their faces, flashing large, white teeth.

"Yes," she said. Hadn't she told them to come in?

They nodded and smiled, taking a step inside. Now they stood rooted less than a meter into the room. The one who had spoken said, "More clothing is on the way."

"We do not expect you to dress as we do when you are outside these walls," added the other one. They looked like they could be brothers. "But we would appreciate your doing so while you are here with us."

"Of course. Thank you." What else could she say? She crossed her legs self-consciously.

"Food will be provided as well. We were sent to make certain you are comfortable." It was the first one who spoke again. "I am Kuan, and this is my brother, Yeng."

Yeng bowed at the waist.

"We are from the Eastern Provinces, visiting this refuge of the Way for a season." He frowned at his own words.

"Forgive me. We are learning to speak Common, and at some times the words, they are not perfect."

"But we learn fast," added Yeng. He tilted his head, his dark eyes focused on the side of Irena's neck. "We see that you have shed the implant. Are you a follower of the Way?"

Her lips parted. Her gaze wavered. "Almost."

"The middle of the road is a good place to be run over," Yeng quipped.

Irena humored him with a forced smile. Or the makings of one.

"Is this child your son?" asked Kuan, stepping forward and halting himself. He bent at the waist as he gazed at the infant beside her on the bed.

"Yes," she said without reservation.

"And what is his name?"

She swallowed. "Harry...Horton." Her maiden name was as good as any.

What about her own Harry? Could she stop the Harold Muldoon of this *when* from leaving her younger self in their bed, disappearing on his midnight errand never to be seen again? Could she find a way to cross his path, convince him not to go into the past?

Or did he even exist now? If only she knew where he'd gone to pick up the BackTracker in the first place. If only her thoughts would focus.

"Harry Horton," Kuan tried out the name and smiled, his teeth seeming to glow in the lamplight. "It is a pleasure to meet you, young Harry." He bowed once.

Yeng did likewise. "And the boy's father?" he ventured. "Is he *almost* a follower of the Way as well?"

She shook her head. For some reason, she thought of the clone of her own father. She'd never met Harry's parents. They both had passed away by the time she met him. "No, he's...a man of science."



Kuan murmured knowingly. "I see."

She didn't know why, but she replied, "I want Harry to grow up knowing the Way. I want him to make up his own mind about what he believes, when he's old enough." Absently, she touched the infant's soft cheek. "I want him to know it's his choice."

"The Master has endowed us each with free will," Kuan said.

"Every day is a choice," Yeng added. He turned as someone approached. "Thank you," he said to the person, just out of sight. When he faced Irena again, his arms were loaded with a pile of fresh robes. "Here you are, as promised."

Kuan bowed and stepped back as Yeng handed them to her. "We will be right outside, should you be in need of anything else." Smiling, they bowed again and removed themselves from the room, leaving the door to slide shut behind them.

Irena pulled the robe on over her black dress and tied it at the waist. Now the only skin that showed was that of her face, hands, and feet tucked into her pumps. Did the monks expect her to go barefoot? Irena noticed the much smaller set of apparel meant for little Harry, along with a plush blanket and a cloth diaper. She'd left the diaper bag in the car. Good to have extra.

She turned toward him, sound asleep, and thought better of changing him. But she set the items beside him, and he stirred, snug and blissful.

*I can't leave.*

Was she intending to? Her heart raced again, adrenaline surging. He would be safe with these monks. She would return at some point, of course she would. She couldn't abandon him here. But she had to go now. She had to find her husband the way she remembered him, from a decade ago. She had to keep him from vanishing from her life, convince him to destroy the BackTracker before he could

take it to the train station and leave it for his younger self. If she did, Cade would never have to kill him for it. She could change the past, and change the future at the same time.

But if she failed, or if Muldoon truly no longer existed in this time, then the infant Harry Muldoon would still be here, safe and sound. He would exist.

The door slid open, and she stepped outside.

"All is well, I trust?" Yeng asked with a hopeful arch of his eyebrows.

"Yes. Thank you." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Anxiously.

"Are you leaving us?"

*How does he know?* "Can you...watch him until I get back?" She swallowed. He wasn't her child. How could she leave him with strangers?

"Of course." Yeng nodded.

"I just need to take care of something. Then I'll be back." *If I can.* "I promise."

Kuan looked as if this were a common occurrence—women leaving their babies at the temple in the middle of the night. "We will watch over him," he said in a serious tone. "Is he in any danger?"

"From the father, perhaps?" Yeng added, leaning in. "Should we keep the child from him?"

"No." Irena frowned. "No, it's nothing like that."

Both monks relaxed. The smiles returned.

*But if there's someone to keep him from—* "The only person who shouldn't come near this baby is a man named Cade. He was a monk of the Way, but..." How could she explain it? Any of it? "He serves another master now."

"Very well. We will do as you wish." They asked no questions.

"Thank you." She reached forward without thinking and hugged Kuan, stiff in her arms. She realized the *faux pas* and drew back. "Thank you, both of you, for everything."

Yeng was beaming again. He'd enjoyed his brother's awkward moment in her grasp.

"We will be seeing you." He bowed.

Kuan did likewise. "May the Master bless your endeavors, as long as they are pleasing in His sight."

*Kidnapping and auto theft? Probably not.*

She nodded, bowing in her own way without knowing why. Maybe a reflex reaction to all of their bowing. She set off across the courtyard.

But then she turned back.

"There's...one other person who shouldn't see him. My husband. We're...no longer together. He's not the father, but..." The thought had struck her all of a sudden. "His name is Muldoon."

*What would happen if the two of them met each other?*

"He could be dangerous," she added.

She remembered stories she'd watched as a girl, science fiction of course, but vaguely she recalled something about a space-time-continuum and the inherent danger of meeting your younger or older self. Nothing good ever came of it.

"We will watch over the child," Kuan promised.

"Fear not," said Yeng. "He will be safe here."

She nodded again, watching them. After all she'd done to save Harry's life, now she was going to abandon him with these strange men?

"I'll be back," she said, and her throat tightened.

"Of course you will." In Kuan's eyes, she saw a peace that surpassed understanding.

She set off across the grounds, feeling something inside her stretch to the breaking point the farther she left that small cubicle and sleeping infant behind.

The gate rolled open with a long creak as she approached, and she kept her head down, eyes on the path before her. She crossed the threshold from holy sanctuary to silent real-world outside, and only then did she look up.

Her father's clone sat in the driver's seat of the stolen auto.

"Oscar—release the passenger door," he said.

The AI gasped, but Irena didn't pay attention to it. She stared back at the clone. He'd followed her. Or somehow, he'd known where she would go.

*Of course he knows. He knows everything I'm going to do!* She bit her lip in frustration.

"Get in," he said coolly as the door glided upward.

She glanced at his hands, his wrists. "Where is it?" The BackTracker. "What have you done with it?"

"Get in, Irena," he repeated.

She remained outside the vehicle. "What aren't you telling me?"

"There is no time!" His tone left no room for debate.

Grinding her teeth, she dropped into the seat beside him. The door closed automatically.

"Oscar—activate engine, manual drive." Of course, the clone also knew the OSCAR override command.

"Confirmed!" the AI responded ecstatically.

The clone took the steering grips as the engine hummed to life. He didn't look at Irena. She glanced back at the temple as the car accelerated from the curb and veered away. The clone whipped the grips to the side, maneuvering a tight U-turn.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"You are. Away from here."

"But Harry—"

"He will be fine. Better than fine. I promise I will look after him. But right now, we have to get you to safety."

"What are you talking about?" She clutched the sides of her seat as he righted the vehicle and floored the accelerator, throwing her head back against the support cushion. She tugged on the safety harness and buckled it.

"Have you seen anything...odd? Since we arrived in this time?"

She frowned, then nodded. "The Pit. It's called The Pearl now." It had been strange, other-worldly in a way, but there had been other things on her mind at the time. "What's that all about?"

"The timelines. They're twining," he said. "Your father said it was possible."

She waited for him to elaborate. The car tore down the vacant street, grey buildings whipping past both sides in a blur. "What do you mean?"

He turned to look her full in the face. "If you remain here, you will die. Just like your alternate."

"My *what*?"

He returned his gaze to the road. "There's no time to explain fully. The realities are twining past the original divergence point, and if you remain here, tied to this world, you will cease to exist—both of you."

"My younger self, you mean?"

"She belongs here. You don't."

"Because I'm from the future."

"Because you're from a different reality."

*What?*

He slammed on the brakes suddenly, and the auto careened sideways, sliding across the slick pavement. At first, Irena thought the car was out of control. But she noticed the calculated look in the clone's eyes as he glanced into the rearview, and she realized this was just his wild manner of navigating. The tires bumped against the curb as he parked parallel in front of a large office structure. The Hancock Building.

Her stomach sank. She'd been here already. Harry's office. His lifeless body, twenty years in the past, after Cade killed him.

But now...only ten years in the past.

"Oscar—open the passenger door," said the clone.

"What are we doing here?"

"You're getting out." He reached into his pants pocket and retrieved what looked like a silver cigarette lighter. "You will need this." He extended it toward her, but she didn't take it. The night air wafted inside her open door. "Please take it, Irena. Your father left it here for you, just in case."

"My father." She eyed him coldly. It figured. Her father didn't know her at all. "I don't smoke."

He almost smiled. "It's more than it appears." He pushed it into her hand. "Go inside, find your husband's office. He won't be there. He is currently on his way to the local police to pick up a certain package—in this reality."

*How can that be?* She frowned. *He isn't dead?*

The clone patted her hand with the lighter in it. "Flip the cap and stare into the flame. The wormhole will present itself as a ripple in the air before you. Step into it, and you'll cross over to your own world, where you belong. You'll be safe there."

"None of this makes any sense," she murmured. "I thought you weren't supposed to tell me what to do."

"Your mission was a success, soldier." He chuckled. "Now it's time for your exit strategy. This is it." He patted her hand again. "You have to trust me, Irena. Your father and I want you to live. But if you stay here, you will die. There's nothing we can do about it."

"Here." She eyed him. "In this *reality*."

"Yes."

"My father wants me to live." She didn't sound like she believed the words she repeated. "What about little Harry?"

"I will take care of him, Irena. Believe me when I tell you this." His eyes became serious, and more than ever they looked like her father's—the father she remembered as a child, when she'd loved him more than any man in the whole world. "I will raise him as my own son. I will care for him here until the day I die."

It was the truth. For some reason, she believed him.

Stepping out of the car, she clutched the lighter in one hand and, as if in a dream, moved toward the glass doors of the Hancock Building's foyer. She didn't look back.

Cyrus Horton's clone watched her go, watched her step inside, greeted by the synthetic security guard. Of course the guard recognized her: Harold Muldoon's wife. He didn't seem to think it strange that she wore a monk's robe. Nor did he seem to notice that she was older by a few years. But who would? Irena Muldoon was a gorgeous woman. In her eyes, the years had taken their toll, but her figure bore the grace and beauty of a woman half her age. She was glorious.

The clone adored her. But not as a daughter.

The memories were there, implanted in his synthetic mind. Watching her grow up, from a precious baby to a beautiful girl. Loving her dearly, every step of the way. Protecting her, whatever the cost. Paternal feelings. Yet there was more, unrelated to his programming, to those memories that were not his own. Emotions that had not been imprinted on him by his creator. They stirred now within his synthetic heart, having sprung into being the moment he'd first met Irena in the flesh. Only hours ago, at Alpha Geminorum.

He'd fallen in love with her. He could not describe it any other way. Was such a thing possible for a clone? Was there something wrong with his programming? Obviously. All he had to do was look in the rearview mirror and see that his synthetic body had aged exponentially. That was unexpected. Perhaps time travel had affected his psyche as well.

*Very interesting*, mused the scientist in him.

When the elevator doors closed, blocking his view, the clone rotated the steering grips, and the car left the curb.

He would return to the gate of the Wayist temple. He would introduce himself as the infant's father, Cyrus Horton. He would allow the monks to read his ident tag—if they

owned a scanner. They would be disinclined at first to relinquish their charge of the child, but he would talk them into it. He would put them at ease, explaining the current condition of his wife, that her substance abuse made it impossible to act rationally.

But he loved her. Oh, how he loved her. A singular woman, as courageous as she was captivating, as intelligent as she was inimitable. He longed to see her again, to bask in her brilliant presence.

But no, she had to leave this world. She had to be safe. Alive. Perhaps someday, when the twining of the timelines was complete, perhaps then he would see her again. He would find her, if it was the last thing he ever did.

For now, he would thank the two monks graciously as he carried young Harry away in his arms. For the next ten years of his life, he would raise the boy in a HellTown apartment. The two of them would be inseparable...until the day the clone died.

Torn apart in a dark alley outside The Pearl.

But the monks would never forget the charge given them by the infant's mother. For followers of the Way, their word was their bond.



## EIGHTEEN

*Now*

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

How long had it been since Cade last descended these very steps in pursuit of Irena Muldoon, his blade dripping with the blood of a police sergeant? Blind in the black, which lurked with a heavy presence all its own. Eight or nine hours ago, perhaps. A lifetime ago. Then, he had been the master of his own fate.

He had been human. Or so he thought.

His time Underground had changed him. He had left the depths of this netherworld a different man. Not a man at all, really. A synthetic—one programmed by its creator with an overriding directive to kill an innocent man in the past. Harold Muldoon, whom he and Irena had sought for so long.

Now that this man was dead, now that Cade had obeyed his kill order, was he once again in command of his own faculties? Or, at any time, could his will be overridden by its creator? Could he be forced to perform another soulless atrocity?

Mary took his hand, her fingers warm and smooth, slipping between his and clasping tightly. It was as if she could sense the troubled nature of his mind. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," she whispered with a squeeze, "I will fear no evil."

The same passage of holy scripture that had passed through his own mind. His lips parted with surprise.

"Who goes?" a cancerous throat rasped from the dark.  
"Who goes!"

Gavin Lennox shouldered the automatic rifle he carried and peered through the infrared scope. He pulled the trigger without pause. Staccato fire exploded in the confined space of the subway portal, and a hoarse scream erupted from the darkness.

Mary clutched onto Cade.

"*We* goes," Lennox muttered. He kept his eye socket flush with the scope as he moved forward. "Well, what do you know?" He stooped to retrieve something off the ground.

"The Gatekeeper," Mary whispered into Cade's ear. "He just...*killed* him?"

Cade did not say a word. Lennox was a dangerous man. And unpredictable.

"Catch," Lennox barked, his voice echoing.

A pair of goggles flew through the air, followed by another. Cade caught them both by the straps.

"Put them on. We'll have the advantage." Lennox was enjoying himself, all of this an adventure to him.

Cade handed a pair of goggles to Mary. "Do as he says."

"There is no advantage," she said so only he could hear. "The freaks will smell us, if they haven't already heard the gunfire."

"I am sure they have." Cade pulled on his goggles, and the darkness transformed into blurry shades of grey.

"What are you two bickering about?" Lennox stood a few meters away, picking through the Gatekeeper's pile of belongings with interest. He glanced at Cade, the black goggles giving his face an insect-like quality. "Hunting season." He grinned, beckoning them to follow. "C'mon, let's get what we came for."

"Maybe they'll kill him," Mary muttered hopefully, adjusting the goggles around her eyes. "He doesn't even know where he's going."

"That does not seem to matter to him."

Cade stopped.

"What is it?" Mary frowned.

"We are being followed." Cade wished for his *kodachi*, but of course Lennox had not allowed him to bring a weapon of any kind, let alone his favored blade.

"Let's move, people!" Lennox said.

"Who is it?" Mary pressed against Cade's back, peering over his shoulder.

"I do not know."

"Should we tell Lennox?"

"No." Friend or foe, the person tailing them would make his presence known eventually. If it proved to be a friend, they would do well to keep Lennox in the dark—figuratively—for the time being. "We should catch up."

"I *hate* him." She held onto Cade with both hands.

"I know, my sister."

She drew back from him. "I'm not really your sister, you know." She sniffed, tugging at the uncomfortable goggles. "We're not related at all, when you think about it. Not by blood, anyway."

He turned to face her, uncertain how to proceed. He was unaccustomed to the amount of conversation she seemed to expect from him. She was fragile at the moment, having seen both her brothers gunned down before her eyes. He did not wish to upset her further.

"Planning some kind of mutiny?" Lennox charged straight for them. "I'll end you both right here, right now, without a second thought." He waved the rifle with menace. "Get the hell over here and show me the way. You." He pointed at Mary. "Lead on."

With obvious reluctance, she joined Lennox. He faced Cade.

"You watch the rear, monk. And I don't mean hers."

"This way," Mary said. She stepped off the ledge at the end of the platform and plunged toward the abandoned tracks below.

Lennox glanced at Cade's folded arms. "So these *freaks* that are supposed to live down here. They're real?"

Cade nodded. *As real as you or I.*

"And they actually...drink people's blood?"

"Only those who make their presence known."

Lennox chuckled. "Cute." He slung the rifle over his shoulder and jumped down toward the tracks, landing with ease.

Cade hesitated, half-turning to glance back over his shoulder. There were two figures now in pursuit, doing their best to remain out of sight, but failing miserably. The goggles detected heat signatures; there was no way to hide from them completely. The two figures cowered behind a corner of the entry portal, but the glow of their combined body heat emanated outward like an aura of vaporous white. If Lennox hadn't been so focused on the path ahead, he would have noticed them. And shot them down, more than likely.

Cade leapt from the ledge to follow Lennox and Mary. They moved in silence, goggles panning left to right, up and down. Cade surveyed the tunnel's every angle with each step. If residents of the Underground had heard the gunfire, there was no indication as of yet. Or perhaps Lennox and his guides were still too close to the outside world for the freaks' liking.

When they had encroached half a kilometer into the darkness, Mary began whispering, quietly at first, building in volume as she walked, unarmed, before them.

"What are you doing?" Lennox hissed. She did not answer him but continued her soliloquy uninterrupted. He turned toward Cade mid-stride. "What is she doing?"

"She quotes the holy scriptures."

"Why?"

"One way to ward off the locals."

Lennox cursed under his breath. "Superstitious fools."

Mary picked up the pace, jogging now, darting left then right, avoiding broken and jagged sections of the subway tracks that would have skewered her otherwise, had she not been able to see them ahead of time. Cade remembered the last time he ventured this way, guided along through the black by Cyrus Horton and his three children. From what he recalled of that trek through the Underground, they would soon come upon one of the secret entrances to Horton's hidden lair. They would open the hatch and slip inside, then seal it shut behind them.

And then? Would Mary give Lennox the power he sought—the BackTracker?

Cade had destroyed two of the wristwatches, smashed them to pieces in the office that had once belonged to Harold Muldoon. If there remained yet another BackTracker device in Horton's Underground laboratory, then Cade knew he would have to destroy it as well. He could not allow Gavin Lennox to have it. Not him, of all people.

His mind turned suddenly to Irena, abandoned in the past, unable to return to her own time for fear of forgetting the love of her life. Where was she now? *When* was she?

Had she used the BackTracker prototype to return to its own time, ten years ago? She could have remained where she was, twenty years in the past, when her younger self was only fourteen years old. Or had she gone back further and tried to keep Cade from murdering her husband?

No. He would have remembered, if that were the case. He would have been there, *then*. She had not attempted to stop him. Harold Muldoon was dead. Of that, he was certain.

And yet...

There was that boy in the penthouse above The Pit. *Harry* was his name—a coincidence? Close to death, attended by the monk, Kuan. Why had Lennox detained them?

A shriek pierced the silence, designed to paralyze the heart with dread for one's life. Shrill cries responded on all

sides, near and far, echoing from high above, yowls of intense delight and ravenous desire. Cold concrete and steel came alive with the cacophony of wild screams. What sounded like the skittering of a million oversized spiders scratched against the tunnel walls and ceiling.

Lennox whirled, rifle at the ready, his head whipping side to side. "Where are they?" he grated out. Not afraid. Not yet.

"They have us surrounded." Cade saw the wafting auras of the freaks, even as they kept themselves hidden behind pipes in the ceiling and broken crates on either side of the subway tracks.

*Have these deviants already dispatched the two figures pursuing us?*

"How close are we to Horton's lab?" Lennox demanded.

Mary turned toward him, her features slack. "Not close enough."

They were nearly half a kilometer away from the closest entry point to Cyrus Horton's Underground laboratory. But they could not go there now. These citizens of the Underground were sure to follow them straight inside.

Mary faced forward, and her voice rose unexpectedly in both volume and pitch with a strength that seemed to flex far beyond the confines of her slender, genetically engineered frame:

"The Master is my light and my salvation. Of whom should I fear?" A short pause as a sudden wave of silence engulfed the darkness. "The Master is the strength of my life. Of whom should I be afraid?"

"More *holy* words?" Lennox said.

"Followers of the Way are known to provide aid for Underground dwellers," Cade said. "The freaks benefit as much as anyone else down here."

"So they won't attack us?"

"I did not say that. The scriptures can have little effect on hardened killers."

"Complete hokum," Lennox muttered with a curse.

The sounds of skittering feet came again, but they moved no closer. They were retreating—albeit slightly. As they relinquished those few meters they had taken, there arose an uneasy chorus of rasping barks in place of the frenzied squeals and shrieks from seconds before.

"What are they doing?" Lennox demanded. He fired a few rounds into the distance, blasting the darkness with futile bravado. Wild laughter erupted in response. "You like that?" He fired a few more shots that flared white from the rifle muzzle. He cursed in disgust as the laughter intensified. "Why don't they come out and face us?"

"They are waiting for you to expend your ammunition," Cade said. He watched the auras drift, merging into an otherworldly fog bank less than a dozen meters away. "They carry only blades."

Lennox slapped at the pockets of his trench coat. "Hate to disappoint. I've got enough magazines to take them all out." If given the chance. "Come on, you freaks! Show yourselves!"

Silence resumed its hold on the moment, one that seemed to stand still for the three figures in the middle of that derelict subway tunnel. Hemmed in on both sides as well as above by Underground natives they could not see, could only hear as they shuffled forward again now, surging despite the shouts of the girl reciting every passage of the holy scriptures she had ever heard in her short life.

The advancing pack—humans from another world, now reduced to half-naked, filthy, long-haired berserkers, teeth sharpened into fangs and fingernails like talons, each gripping a machete or other type of blade—launched themselves onto their prey, heedless of the fiery rounds that tore through their emaciated limbs. Where their brothers and sisters fell, limp and wide-eyed, never to move again, there were two, three more to take their place, lashing out

with a murderous rage that could not be satiated, a thirst for vengeance that would never be fully quenched.

This was their territory. Outsiders did not belong here.

Mary cowered on the ground between the iron rails of the subway tracks, her body curled inward, head between her knees, hands interlaced across the back of her neck. She cried out in the din of the screeching mob, rabid with bloodlust, rushing straight for her, clawing at her, biting at her arms, piercing and drawing the blood Cyrus Horton had designed to flow through her veins. She curled her hands into fists and beat them away until her knuckles were black with blood, both theirs and hers, until she was too weak to fight them off.

Cade was there with a machete he'd wrestled from one of the creatures, slicing to and fro with the blade, ending one adversary after the next as they came close to stabbing Mary where she lay. Lennox also stood beside her, his automatic rifle spitting rounds into the onslaught, pausing only as he slammed another magazine into the chamber and cursed furiously. They protected her, both of them. Even as they bled from the rips in their own flesh, the fang marks on their own arms, they moved to fend off these horrible fiends, to keep them from finishing her off first.

They were her *knights*. She remembered stories Father had told her of ancient times, the Knights of the Round Table and their wonderful code of chivalry. Seeing Cade like this, she knew he was her White Knight. And she was his maiden in distress. She loved him so—never more than she did right now as he leapt all about her, from one side to the other, so light on his feet, so skilled with the blade, defending her life by striking down every freak that came close. And Lennox? He was the Black Knight. He protected her, but only because she had promised to help him. As soon as she was no longer of any use to him...

She flinched at the memory of Peter's head exploding. Paul staring at the ceiling with a bloody hole between his



eyes. She glanced up at Lennox as he reloaded another fresh magazine.

*I hope his rifle jams. I hope these monsters tear him apart!*

Lennox gulped down the fetid air and winced, splattered in blood from his unkempt hair to his high jackboots. Flecks of the stuff covered his goggles. He turned to Cade.

"How much more of this can you take?" He loaded his last mag but waited to recommence firing. The bloodthirsty mob hung back for now. They were also waiting.

Cade's machete dripped black in the goggles' negative light. He seemed to sense the lull as well. He watched the freaks, throngs of them in the dark. Their mouths gaped with hideous grins of shark-like teeth. Their eyes burned white with hate.

Their numbers had increased. They were amassing now for a final onslaught. Confidently, they nudged one another and nodded, eyeing their prey, knowing they would soon be victorious. The outsiders would be slaughtered. This territory would be reclaimed.

"Down to my last rounds." Lennox swept the rifle muzzle side to side along the ranks of savages.

"Make them count." Cade stood ready.

"Give me something." Mary rose to her feet. She was no damsel in distress, not really. She would not let these men give their lives for her. "Give me a weapon. I want to fight."

Lennox eyed her. Then with a shrug, he reached into the deep pocket of his trench coat and withdrew a collapsible knife. He thumbed the switch, and the broad blade snapped forward.

"Careful." He handed her the haft, and she took it eagerly, holding it out in front of her with both hands, elbows locked. "Don't you even think about using it on me."

The thought may have crossed her mind.

They stood back to back, facing the bloodthirsty freaks. Mary whispered snatches of scripture, her throat dry. Lennox

cursed under his breath, aiming down the rifle's sight as he swept the muzzle to and fro, waiting for the damned degenerates to make their move. Cade stood at ease, jaw set stoically, blade held at the ready. Poised to attack.

Again, Cade's thoughts turned to the two figures pursuing them. Were they still alive? It did not matter who they were. Anyone, human or synthetic, would have been welcome right at this moment. Strength in numbers, after all. Even when you were outnumbered twenty to one.

The freaks crept forward, bare arms dangling, bloody blades gripped with deft familiarity, shoulders hunched, teeth gleaming. Cackling, toying with their prey as they advanced.

"Wait." Cade had seen Lennox shift his grip on the rifle. Prepared to fire.

"I *am* waiting," Lennox grated out. Patience had never been one of his virtues. "What are *they* waiting for?"

"They are weighing our resolve."

Lennox cursed. "If we make it through this, monk..." He did not finish. He would not have known what to say.

But he had more than enough resolve to live through this. The motivation. All he wanted was the BackTracker. He had never been so close to obtaining it, and nothing would sway him from his course. He didn't even think about whipping out the lighter and crossing back into his own world. This was why he was here, come what may. And once he had the device, he would have no reason to return to this point in time again. He would become the most powerful man in the world, able to alter the past, securing more prestige for himself in the present. Recreating himself in as many different ways as he pleased. He would be a god among men, and no one would ever stand in his way.

The governors would serve him. The Provinces would be his. All would gladly bow before the almighty Gavin Lennox. He would make sure of it.

Without warning, the savages were upon them. Charging forward as one, shrieking and cackling, they fell upon their prey, claws grasping, blades swinging wildly. The machete in Cade's practiced hands swept with precision, lopping limbs and heads and releasing gushers of blood into the air. The rifle in Gavin Lennox's hands spit fire. He squeezed off two or three rounds at a time, punching through targets, sending them twitching to the slime at their feet. Mary cut and thrust with the knife, managing to take down two of her attackers.

But there were more than enough to take their place.

"I'm out!" Lennox shouted, whipping the stock of the empty rifle against any combatants within range, cracking skulls and sending them to the ground.

Others had their hands on him now, their blades slicing through his coat, ripping it from his body. Fangs gleamed, descending onto his bare neck from behind. He screamed.

Cade moved in a blur of calculated moves, his blade rising and falling, slashing and sweeping as if part of a choreographed dance. Despite the range of his mayhem, the freaks managed to leap onto his back, biting and tearing at his ears, clawing at his battered face. Gripping the hilt of his blade in both hands, he fought the inevitable.

They had knocked the knife free from Mary's grasp. They held her arms and legs down and prepared to cut her open, to gut her like a pig. She screamed until her throat allowed no more sound.

*Have mercy on us...*

Cade was powerless against them now, pressing in on him from all sides, pinning his sword arm uselessly. He prayed, even as he questioned whether the Almighty would hear the voice of a SYN.

*Send an avenging angel, Master of all. Shine Your light into this dark place...*

Sharp fangs pierced the flesh of his neck, his arms. Claws tore his robe to shreds and ripped them from him,

baring more of his white skin. The creatures shrieked with delight.

He did not cry out. He grit his teeth as they drew his blood and cut deep into him, tearing his body open. Did he have a soul? Once they bled out the genetically engineered life from him and left his hollow corpse to rot beside these abandoned rails, would heaven be waiting for him in the afterlife? Was he a fool to desire such a thing?

He swayed on the threshold of consciousness. Had they not been so close upon him, his blade would have fallen from limp fingers to the ground. As it was, the machete remained immobile against his side. He was aware of Mary's hoarse gasps and the screams from Lennox. This was the end for them. Even if there came some kind of miracle, a *deus ex machina* at this moment in time, they would not survive the damage already done.

They would die. Like this. Underground.

Unseen and unheard by anyone else in NewCity.

Except for one. The Underground had been his home for over twenty years now, and he really hated what these freaks from another world had done with the place. He came leaping out of a secret hatch in the far wall with a heavy plasma rifle in tow.

With barely a sound, he took aim and went to work.

The fluid erupted in a jet of white lightning, tearing through the bodies of frenzied cannibals, dozens at a time, leaving them with gaping holes in their midsections where there once had been hearts, lungs, and other internal organs. Their bodies collapsed, useless, before their brains even registered what had happened. The jets of plasma kept coming, streaming forth, cutting a wide swath in the writhing horde.

Shrieks echoed from the survivors among their ranks, and pandemonium broke out. Freaks scattered in all directions, their eyes wide in disbelief as they stared at the lone figure headed straight for them.

"That's right," Cyrus Horton laughed. "I'm coming for you bastards!"

He squeezed the trigger, and another streak of liquid lightning leapt forth, dissolving the head of a freak too stupefied to escape in time.

The others broke away fast, leaving their prey where they lay, half-dead and covered in their own blood. Horton charged after their retreat a few paces, far enough to take out a dozen more with his last rounds.

"And don't come back!" he shouted and then spit for emphasis. Turning on his heel, he dropped beside Mary's ravaged body. "How's my girl?" he whispered, his fingertips caressing her left temple. He bit his lip as he surveyed the damage.

She choked. Blood spilled from her lips. "Father," she gurgled with relief. She was barely conscious, her throat and abdomen wide open, exposing every wet organ underneath.

"I'm going to fix you, Mary. Don't you worry, don't worry about any of this. It's just superficial stuff, know what I mean? I'll fix you right up. You'll see. You'll be good as new when I'm through with you." A tear skidded into the rim of Horton's goggles.

Lennox stirred. His condition was no better than Mary's. Not that it mattered. Horton wouldn't have fixed him, even if he could.

"I see you have...the latest mod," Lennox rasped, his goggles turning toward the plasma rifle. He chuckled to himself, spitting up blood. "Of course you would. You...made the damn thing."

"That's right."

"Couldn't have...shown up any sooner?" Lennox glanced down at his torso and groaned. Torn intestines hung out of his ravaged midsection, slick and wet. Gagging, he looked away.

"Came as soon as I saw what was going on out here." Horton shifted on his knees and rested his eyes on Cade.

*Poor boy got the worst of it. He set his jaw. But I can fix him. I'll fix him up better than ever!* "Cade?" He touched his shoulder. "Can you hear me, boy?"

Cade didn't stir. Horton reached forward and slipped the night-vision goggles off him. White eyelids lay closed underneath. He didn't look like he was sleeping.

"You're gonna be fine, kiddo. I promise you that." Horton swallowed. "I'm gonna make everything right again. You'll see."

"The...BackTracker?" Lennox's voice was thick and garbled. From the looks of him, he wouldn't be talking much longer—or breathing, either. "Yeah?" He coughed, spilling blood from his mouth. "You going to...travel back through time...and keep all this from happening?"

Horton paused. "That's why you're here, isn't it? You want it for yourself."

"I hear there's...more than one." The makings of a gruesome smile tugged at the side of Lennox's face, giving him an ironic, lopsided expression. "I wouldn't think...you'd mind sharing."

His mouth gaped in a frozen look of horror. He shook with sudden spasms before his body went rigid. Then he exhaled, long and loud, and lay still.

Horton watched him expire.

"Well, you're never going to get it, Mr. Lennox. Because you're dead. And that tends to get in the way of things." He grinned as he got to his feet. He kicked Lennox in the side a few times to make his point. "That's right, you're *dead*. You hear me, you son-of-a-bitch? Dead!"

"So am I."

Horton whirled around at the sudden voice.

"Remember me?" Muldoon said.

Horton stood frozen, staring—but not at Muldoon. Harold Muldoon was a mere detective murdered in his own office twenty years ago. Horton didn't recognize him as anyone of importance. But he did recognize the older man

standing beside this tall stranger. And the sight of the bizarre apparition seized Cyrus Horton with a sudden dread he could not fathom.

"Hey there," said the older man. "How's it going?" He shrugged his boney shoulders a bit and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat.

Horton swallowed. Hidden beneath the goggles, his eyes darted toward the plasma rifle at his feet. Empty, yes, but these two wouldn't know that.

"You're..." He licked his lips, suddenly dry. So was his throat. "You're *me*."

"KaBOOM!" The older man grinned. "There goes the space-time continuum. Pretty weird, huh?"

"Me from...?"

"The future. A little ways down the road."

"I see." Horton didn't see at all. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Just making sure everything turns out all right. Lennox was quite a bad egg."

"He's dead."

"Apparently so. Good work."

Horton frowned. "I had nothing to do with—"

"You really shouldn't lie to me. Not the best use of your time. I'm *you*, remember? You saw all the carnage going on out here, and you intervened only when you saw the freaks give ol' Lennox enough of the business to take him out of the picture. I remember it clearly. I watched via the surveillance monitors inside the lab—"

"Do you remember *this*?" Horton stooped to pick up the plasma rifle.

"Leave it." Muldoon had a revolver trained on him.

Horton froze, doubled over.

"He's a crazy devil, this one," the older man said without malice, shaking his head at his younger self. "Best to keep a watchful eye on him."

"What the hell do you want?" Horton demanded, rising with empty hands. "You got some kind of important message from the future, then let's hear it! Otherwise, you're wasting my time. I've got work to do." His hands swept over the broken bodies of the two SYNs. "There isn't much time."

"You're right about that." The older man nodded. "The realities are twining."

"Yeah? So? It's to be expected. I've been to the other side, and there I'm a dead man. Or I've been dead for years..." He scratched at his wild, wiry head. "Something like that. Things over there are confusing. Here, everything makes more sense."

"Not for long. See, you made a mistake. You killed the wrong man."

"But you said—" He pointed at Lennox.

"Not him." The older man pointed at Muldoon. "Him. Our daughter loves this guy."

Horton scowled behind his goggles and crossed his arms. "He looks alive to me."

A lone shriek echoed in the distance. A scout, more than likely. Giving the all-clear. Safe to resume all homicidal activities Underground.

"We can't stay out here." Horton bent down again.

"Careful," Muldoon warned.

"Help me carry them." Horton reached under Mary's knees and back and struggled, grunting as he lifted her.

"Leave that one." He jerked his head toward Lennox.

"You mind?" The older Horton turned to Muldoon. "I don't have the strength I once did." He bent to retrieve the plasma rifle.

Muldoon holstered his revolver and crouched beside the body of the bald white man. The albino who'd been with Irena. They both had traveled through time, each with a BackTracker device. But this man was here, now, gutted and bleeding out, probably already dead. Where was Irena? *When* was she?



"This way. Be quick. Their bloodlust is stronger than their fear." With the dying woman clutched in his arms, the younger Horton staggered away, back toward the steel door from which he'd emerged in a blaze of glory earlier.

The older version of him followed, shouldering the plasma rifle. Muldoon lifted the soggy remains of the white man, drooling blood down his coat in heavy rivulets, but he paused before pursuing the two Cyrus Hortons.

The dead man they were leaving behind looked familiar. The hair and clothes were all wrong, but the face—there was only one face other than Mayor Joseph Reeves and SYNCorp's Ashland Solomon that was so well-known in all of NewCity. Gavin Lennox, owner of The Pearl. Who was he in this reality?

*Some kind of goth-metal rock star, by the looks of him.*

"Harry?" The older Horton half-turned. "I'd hate to see the locals get you. You're the last of your kind!" Chuckling to himself, he moved on.

Muldoon followed.

Beyond the steel door with the wheel lock lay a dusty concrete passage. Elder Horton tightened the lock behind them, and the younger one muttered something about never being able to use that door again. According to him, the freaks would camp outside for the next month or two, now that they'd seen it used.

The three men moved in silence down the passage until they reached another steel door, ajar with a sliding bolt on the inside. The younger Horton kicked it open, letting it crash to the side as he stepped into the harsh light of the room beyond. Muldoon removed his goggles, as the other two had already done. They stood in a fully equipped laboratory with massive incubation chambers along the far wall—the kind he'd once seen at SYNCorp on a case long ago. Designed for the maturation of synthetic neonates.

Muldoon nodded to himself. The man he carried wasn't human, and neither was that woman. SYNs, both of them.

Any human in their condition would have been long gone at this point, like Lennox outside. But these two—maybe they weren't as dead as they looked.

In that case, Muldoon had more than a few questions for the albino monk.

"Make some room," younger Horton grunted, and his older counterpart stepped forward to sweep onto the floor all the gadgets and parts lying atop a sturdy table. Horton grumbled as he set Mary down.

"You know this stuff's all crap." The older man kicked at the gizmos underfoot.

"Not all of it," Horton retorted, shuffling toward the first maturation chamber on the left. He heaved the solid glass door open and busied himself with the touchscreen on the console nearby.

"All of it. Except for this, maybe." He picked up a wristwatch and glanced back at Muldoon with a wry grin.

"Look familiar?"

Muldoon's eyes locked onto the BackTracker. His chest tightened.

*That's it. All he needed to know was when.*

*When is she?*

The albino would know. He'd have to. Muldoon dropped his dead weight beside the woman, and they lay still, looking like a pair of macabre autopsies in progress.

"The last one?"

Elder Horton nodded. Wistfully, he turned the wristwatch over before his eyes. "I never made another."

"Thanks for telling me my future," younger Horton snapped over his shoulder. "Now I know what to change!"

"Just to spite me? I don't think so." Elder Horton shook his head. "You may be juvenile, but you're not stupid. You know it's done more than enough damage. We just about destroyed the fabric of space-time, you know, with all those divergent realities and what-not. Look how close Lennox came to getting his grubby mitts on it! You know what he

would've done? Set himself up as ruler of the world, that's what." He sighed wistfully, staring at the BackTracker.

"Maybe you had it right, Harry. Maybe we should destroy it."

*Not yet!*

Muldoon stepped forward and held out his blood-streaked palm. "I'll take care of that."

"Oh no you don't." Younger Horton approached the table. "Give it here." He snatched the BackTracker from his older self and pocketed it. "We've got more important matters to attend to. You." He pointed at Muldoon. "Help me get her into the chamber."

Muldoon glanced at Horton's pocket and nodded. Working together, they placed the woman's body inside the incubation chamber, angled back at sixty degrees. Horton shut the curved glass door, and it sealed itself with the pneumatic hiss of an airlock.

"On to the next." Horton turned to the chamber beside it and repeated the routine: opening the glass door, busying both hands with the console's touchscreen.

"Why did you bring it back to your younger self, Harry?" Elder Horton leaned on the table, his grey eyes fixed on Muldoon with keen interest. "In your reality?"

Muldoon frowned. "I-uh—"

"Not off to a great start there," quipped the younger Horton.

"Shut up you," snapped Elder Horton. "Not everybody's mind races at the speed of light."

"Faster." Horton glanced over his shoulder at the older man. "Or can't you remember?"

"Nothing's wrong with my memory. But there's obviously something amiss with yours if you don't remember sending Cade back to kill him." He gestured at Muldoon.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Horton muttered. "But even if I did what you say, I probably had a good reason for it."

"You did." Muldoon said it before knowing why. Both of them fixed their eyes on him. "It was my fault. The whole diverging realities thing."

"See?" Younger Horton returned to the console. "He agrees with me. Maybe I should kill him again. Make the whole world a real peachy place."

The older man shook his head. "Ignore him. He's an ignorant son-of-a-bitch." He almost chuckled. "Back to you. Why'd you do it? Go back and give the device to yourself twenty years earlier? What was the point?"

Muldoon glanced at the younger Horton's pocket again. Then his gaze turned to the white SYN on the table.

*As soon as Dr. Frankenstein brings you back to life...* Until then, Muldoon had to wait this out. "I thought he—I could do more good with it back then."

"Poppycock!" crowed the old man.

"What?" Muldoon frowned.

"I've got a highly sensitive hooley detector, mister. I know you're not telling the whole story."

Muldoon shook his head.

"Don't try to deny it," Elder Horton said. "I know for a fact your time travel psychosis isn't interfering with your memory in this reality. The same thing happened to me the first time I crossed over. And here's the kicker: it's permanent! That's right, my boy, you'll be able to solve Sudoku's up the wazoo from here on out! So tell it to me straight. Why'd you give the BackTracker to yourself at that stage in the game? What was the logic behind it?"

Muldoon's jaw muscle twitched as he clenched his jaw. The old man was right about one thing: there was no more *time travel psychosis* mucking up his mind. He could remember everything, whether he wanted to or not.

"I made a mistake."

The older man nodded, listening.

"Now this one," younger Horton interrupted, returning to the table. "Help me move him."

It took both Muldoon and Horton to carry the albino's body to the chamber and set him inside.

"How long before...?" Muldoon didn't know what to ask. "When will it be operational?"

Younger Horton's eyes were trained on the console as the glass door sealed itself shut. "We should know in the next ten minutes or so if the remains are viable. Until then, we wait."

"Stop avoiding my question." Elder Horton raised an eyebrow. "So you made a mistake. We all do. Hell, *he's* made quite a few doozies."

"*We*," Younger Horton corrected without looking up.

"The difference is that I've learned from them." The older man ignored his younger version's muttered obscenity. "Go on, Harry. I need to hear this."

Muldoon continued reluctantly, "I thought I was doing the right thing. Going back in time, solving cases. Just watching at first. Being at the scene of the crime, not interfering. But I could only do that for so long before I wanted to start fixing things. Not just solving a missing persons case. Finding out what happened to the kid. Keeping that kid from getting snatched in the first place."

The older man nodded. The younger one came over to listen, crossing his arms and scowling.

Muldoon narrowed his gaze. "Somehow, I knew I was changing things. Fraying that cord you told me about."

Elder Horton smiled at that.

"But it never really affected me until I came home one night and—" Muldoon's eyes stung suddenly, but he maintained a death grip on his composure. "My wife was gone."

"She left you, huh?" Younger Horton smirked. "Don't blame her. You've got a real psycho vibe about you."

"No." Muldoon faced him. "She disappeared. All of her things—her clothes, her *stuff*—all the gifts we'd gotten from our wedding. My ring." He held up his left hand with the

bare ring finger. "Everything was gone. Not a trace of her remained. It was like...she never existed."

"Must have been a real shock," said the older man.

"I Linked up the police. I knew a sergeant at the nineteenth precinct pretty well back then. But they had no record of a—" He stopped himself.

"Irena Horton."

Muldoon looked away. "I erased her from existence."

"How'd you do it?" asked the younger Horton.

Muldoon held up his hands. "That's the thing. I have no idea what I did. But I kept going back, trying to undo everything I'd done. Nothing worked. She was gone for good."

*Why am I sharing this?* He clenched his jaw.

"So I decided to take the BackTracker to my younger self, years before I'd ever met Irena. That way, I knew she'd still be alive, somewhere out there. I hoped she'd stay that way."

"Why did your younger self want it?"

"Ever since the raid on Alpha Geminorum, when the Blackshirts found everything but the missing prototype, it had been all over the Link. The finder's fee was substantial." Muldoon shrugged. "I needed the money."

"But you kept the device for yourself."

Muldoon nodded.

"That's how the twin realities diverged." Younger Horton said with a slow nod. "You went back to his time and stayed there, but he took the BackTracker and went further back and changed the past. When he returned to his present: *voila!* A whole different reality was waiting to kick him in the balls." He laughed out loud. "So he's the one I killed, is that right?"

Elder Horton nodded without humor.

"Then why didn't it collapse the alternate reality? Kaput? End of story?"

"Because that one—" Elder Horton jerked a thumb back toward the darkness outside and what was left of Gavin Lennox. "—got his hands on the Translator prototype and found his way into this reality, where he killed himself."

Quick correction: "His *alternate*."

"And that did what, exactly?"

"Who knows? Something weird, metaphysically. That's all I can figure. And if that wasn't bad enough, the breaches started multiplying, with access points all over the place. The membrane between realities is freakin' Swiss cheese right now, and it's only getting worse. Hence the future messed-up world I hail from, where the populace is seriously losing their minds."

"Metaphysics?" Younger Horton sneered. "You're not following the *Way* now, are you?"

Elder Horton grinned. "Let's just say I'm open to other possibilities."

"Sure it's not *your* fault, by traveling back in time? Or maybe it's him." Younger Horton glared at Muldoon. "You said it yourself. He doesn't belong here."

Elder Horton shrugged. "Plenty of blame to go around, I suppose."

Younger Horton cursed under his breath and faced Muldoon. "You want to know what I think?"

*Not really.* Muldoon glanced toward the chamber where the albino lay, dead to the world.

"I think you returned the favor." He laughed at Muldoon's blank expression. "I killed you, and you killed me! That's why your wife—my daughter—disappeared from your reality. It's the only explanation." He turned away to check on the current status of the two SYNs.

Muldoon stared at him. "I don't remember doing that."

*Wouldn't I? And why would he be here, now, if I killed him?*

But this was a different reality.

"Maybe you haven't done it yet," Younger Horton said with a sly wink, patting the BackTracker in his pocket.



## NINETEEN

"What is your relationship to the child?" The doctor gave the monk a doubtful look. But the report had to be filed, and her fingertips hovered over the messenger in her palm.

Kuan Ti remembered the boy's mother, that night when she brought young Harry to the temple. He had been only a baby then. Ten years ago.

"I am his guardian, in the absence of his father. Is there anything that can be done for him?" His gaze remained on the boy's ears. The bleeding had stopped, but he was still unconscious.

"Once we have verified payment, we can discuss treatment." She tapped the messenger, her fingers moving across the screen in a superhuman blur. "What is your name?"

"Kuan Ti, but I do not believe—"

She held out a scanner. "Ident tag, please."

He presented his wrist with some resignation. He knew what she would find. The scanner beeped, and the doctor frowned, tapping the screen again. Cold eyes focused on the monk.

"You have no credit."

He bowed at the waist with a faint smile. "I am a follower of the Way."

"Is there no one else who can provide payment for this child's medical care?"

*Gavin Lennox. Why not?*

"Mr. Lennox, the owner of this establishment, promised the boy would be cared for." *Yeng and I promised he would be kept safe. But now look at him. We have failed miserably.*

"I am sure it would be all right if you were to bill Mr. Lennox for your services."

She did not appear convinced. "I would need to speak with a representative of this establishment, should that be the case."

*George—the SYN.*

"I will find such a person. Please, do not leave. I will return."

Kuan hastened out of the common room and into the hallway, finding the door at the end of the hall unlocked. It slid open as soon as he approached. Quickly, he descended the dark stairway outside, lit only by glow strips mounted along the floorboards.

Complete silence held The Pit in a cold, steely grip. The patrons had long since vacated the premises, along with the violent musical group on stage. Bodies remained, however—corpses cut down by the large man named Peter, when he and the two with him had made their entrance.

"Hello?" Kuan's voice echoed, hanging in the air as he reached the front gates and the desk nearby. A lone figure sat there, head in his hands. Projected upward from the deskscreen before him, a Link alert rotated in a glowing holo image. "Is someone there?"

The figure trembled in the dark. Whimpering softly.

As Kuan drew closer, he saw why.

GAVIN LENNOX, OWNER OF THE PIT—DECEASED -  
SLAIN UNDERGROUND—TIME OF DEATH—

"Why?" the SYN murmured, sniffing, eyes bleary as he glanced up. "Why Sir Gavin? Why like this?"

Kuan had no words of comfort for him. All he could think of was the doctor upstairs, that she would leave if she learned of this news. Then how would Harry receive the help he needed?

"What will I do? What will happen to me? This place has been great—I'm like Sir Gavin's second in command. Where else could a synthetic land a position like that, huh?" He

broke down into sobs. "They'll probably terminate me. You know what that means." He drew a finger across his throat. "Into the SYNCorp recycle bin!"

"In your position, are you...privy to Mr. Lennox's line of credit?" He noted the blank look on the SYN's face and explained further, "The doctor upstairs requires payment for her services. She will not treat the boy until payment is complete."

"It's gone—all of it. The governor took everything! It'll never be the same here." Then, with sudden inspiration, "Maybe Reeves will let me stay on in some capacity. You know, to keep the Pit running like it should. I know the ins and outs of this place like nobody else."

*This SYN is as self-centered as any human, Kuan mused. Perhaps because he was created by self-centered humans.*

Footsteps echoed behind him, and he turned in time to see the doctor taking her leave.

"You saw it too, huh?" the SYN called weakly after her.

"It's all over the Link." She left without another word. The gates creaked shut behind her.

"We must call for another doctor," Kuan said.

The SYN shook his head and wiped his runny nose on a sleeve. "Can't. Curfew's in effect for another couple hours. When morning comes, maybe."

*The boy may not have a couple hours.*

"What about—?" Kuan gestured toward the gates.

"Curfew does not apply to her?"

"She's the governor's personal physician. Special privileges and all that." He blew his nose into his hands and wiped them across the deskscreen, smearing it. "No other doctor, nobody else in town, would chance breaking curfew." He started sobbing again without warning, covering his face. "What am I going to *do*?"

"I am leaving this place." Kuan stepped away from the desk. "And I am taking the boy with me."

The SYN made no response, oblivious to anything beyond his own situation. He continued to be unaware of his surroundings minutes later when the monk appeared at the foot of the stairs with the boy's unconscious body draped over one shoulder.

The alley door crashed shut behind Kuan as he stepped out into the night's cold mist. For a moment, he hesitated, glancing first toward the main street in front of The Pit. Too exposed out there. He turned his gaze down the opposite end of the alley and the side street beyond. Both as silent as walking paths through a cemetery.

*Underground... Abandoned subway tunnels... Secret lab...*

He recalled the interchange between Lennox, the bald white monk, and the young woman before the three of them had left the penthouse together. Cyrus Horton—she'd mentioned him by name. The boy slung over Kuan's shoulder shared the same surname. Coincidence? Unlikely. It had not been a day for coincidences.

*If this is an alternate version of NewCity, then the nearest subway portal would be...*

He turned his back on the main street and headed down the alley in the opposite direction. The dark street beyond would take them five or six blocks to the closest portal. He kept to the shadows, heeding what the SYN had warned regarding a curfew. Blackshirts seemed to be keepers of the peace in this world, and he did not relish the idea of another encounter with one of their shock prods.

Even so, he did not escape the notice of a certain Federal police officer sitting in his cruiser. The headlights flashed on, blinding in their intensity, almost as if they had been waiting there for Kuan to appear.

"Halt," came an amplified voice from the vehicle. "You are in violation of civil code 38116. Curfew remains in effect. Stay right where you are."

Kuan held up a hand to shield his eyes.

"Please—we need to see a doctor. This boy is in need of immediate attention." Could the Blackshirt hear him? Would he care?

The driver's door drifted upward, and a large man stepped out, favoring his right leg as he limped forward, past the glaring headlights. His brawny silhouette stopped a few paces in front of the squad car.

Kuan squinted into the light but could see nothing of the officer's features. "Please," he said. "We need a doctor."

"Where are you headed?" The man's voice sounded familiar. "Medical offices are closed until morning."

The truth? To find the body of Gavin Lennox. *To take from his remains the cigarette lighter that brought us here in the first place. To return to our own world, where NewCity citizens are allowed to walk the streets at night and medical offices remain open for emergencies!*

But Kuan said none of this. It would have sounded as insane as it was. "We were looking for—"

"Lennox?" The officer turned, and the light shone across the beard on his heavy jaw. It was the Blackshirt captain, the same man Kuan had taken down in the penthouse earlier with a strike to the leg. Armstrong was his name. "The bastard's dead. Haven't you heard?"

Kuan nodded, unsure how to proceed.

"C'mon." The captain turned back to the car. "I'll take you wherever you need to go."

*I am not sure that would be possible.* But Kuan followed warily, nonetheless. Once past the grill and headlights, he blinked his eyes as they adjusted to the dark. The cruiser sat empty. The captain was alone.

"Where are your men?" Kuan laid Harry on the backseat and slid in beside him as the door rotated shut.

"Sent them home." The captain dropped behind the steering grips and waited for his door to close.

"Yet you remained here."

The captain glanced up at him in the rearview mirror. He pressed his thumb against the ignition pad, and the engine purred to life. He shook his head. "It's been one godawful night. Can't sleep until I do something to make it better. Balance the scales a bit." He paused. "Glad you made it out of there. Was hoping I could lend you two a hand."

"Where will you take us?"

He shrugged thick shoulders and accelerated away from the curb, whipping the steering grips to the side for a quick maneuver that brought the car around, facing the opposite direction. Then he floored the accelerator, and the car raced through the night, transforming the buildings on either side into blurs of grey.

"I'm a little curious to see what happened to Lennox. What do you say?" He glanced into the rearview again.

Kuan thanked the Master for their good fortune. "That would be of mutual interest."

"Is the kid stable?"

"For now."

The captain kept his eyes fixed on the vacant street ahead. "So what's wrong with him?"

Kuan swept a lock of black hair from Harry's pale forehead. "He does not belong here."

"Kidnapped."

Kuan felt his abdomen tighten. *We took him from Harold Muldoon's apartment, my brother and I—but that was in our NewCity, in our world. How would this man know of such a thing?*

The captain let the silence run on before breaking it. "I checked the citizen database, ran the kid's DNA through the Link. Got a match." He coughed. "From forty-two years ago."

Kuan frowned. "What?"

"According to a report filed at the time, this kid was snatched right out of his damn *crib* from his own house. Happened forty-two years ago, to the day. But he doesn't look much older than eleven, does he?" He cursed under his

breath, shaking his head and squeezing the steering grips.  
"His name's Harold Muldoon."

Kuan's lips parted. *How can this be?* "It must be a mistake." *Perhaps in this world, this reality, such was the case. But not in ours. The child's mother came to us for help, and their surname was Horton—*

"Ever hear of Cyrus Horton?"

"Yes."

"Before the government shut him down, he was working on some crazy stuff over at Alpha Geminorum. Time travel and what-not, if you can believe. But that was a couple decades ago." He paused. "Word on the street was Horton went Underground." He glanced into the rearview again. "Did Lennox go there to meet him?"

Kuan could not be sure. He strained to remember the conversation he heard in the penthouse. His attention had been divided at the time between so much gunfire and blood. It was difficult for him to recall much with any real clarity. *Underground. Secret lab.*

"I believe so."

The captain nodded, his suspicions confirmed. "And how exactly do you fit into the picture?"

"I do not understand."

"Well, we've got a mad scientist, a power-hungry nightclub owner, and an eleven-year-old time traveler. I know there's got to be some kind of crazy-ass science fiction involved here. I'm just curious how a monk of the Way fits in."

"I am not sure that I do."

"Just as clueless as me, huh?" He chuckled to himself. "Either this is all one hell of a bad dream, or there's something seriously rotten in Denmark."

Kuan frowned at the obscure reference, uncertain of its meaning.

"How do you do it? Live without the Link?" Armstrong said.

Kuan blinked at this sudden course change in their conversation.

"All you Way-followers go unplugged, right?"

Kuan nodded, recalling the meeting he'd had with Gavin Lennox at The Pearl. How it had ended. *I wanted him to use his wealth, his influence, for the good of NewCity's human population, turned into zombies by the Link.* Had Kuan's zeal waned in the face of this new reality? The things he had seen in the past few hours... In many ways, his concern for the zombies of his own world seemed like a distant memory. Would he ever resume his crusade to bring an end to the Link and its myriad addictions?

"How's that working for you?" Armstrong said.

"We live as the humans of old," Kuan replied, but his voice sounded lifeless. "My mind is my own."

"Yeah." The captain sniffed, braking suddenly and sending Kuan against the back of the passenger seat. He scrambled to keep the boy from sliding onto the floor. "I'm not much for conspiracy theories, but I've often considered how easy it would be to take over the world with the right Link-based mind control." He killed the engine. "Good thing those geeks over at Alpha Geminorum monitor everything as closely as they do." His right hand closed on the double-barreled shotgun mounted below the dashboard as his door drifted upward. "We're here."

Kuan glanced outside. In the middle of the moonlit sidewalk, there lay what looked like a portal to the subway system below. But it had not been used as such in quite some time. Remnants of caution tape fluttered in the cold breeze. Graffiti in all shapes and sizes, along with foul obscenities, adorned the walls leading down. Warnings to leave the Underground-dwellers to themselves.

He reached under Harry's arms and knees and drew him close, removing him from the backseat.

"Think that's a good idea?" Armstrong said.

"I will not leave him." *We must cross over together.*



The captain shrugged. "Stay close." He gazed up at the shattered streetlamps. The surveillance cameras lay in pieces across the asphalt. "Smart," he mused. Then he dug into one of the deep pockets in his black coat. "Here. Put these on. You'll need 'em."

With a quizzical frown, Kuan took the rubber goggles extended toward him.

"Dark as hell down there, from what I recall." The captain grit his teeth. "All right. Let's do this." His boots thumped forward with heavy, sure strides.

Kuan followed, hesitating at the top of the stairs. He peered down, unable to see past the first flight. After that, it was all impenetrable black that hissed of death and reeked of untreated sewage. The frayed and twisted caution tape seemed to creep of its own volition along the grey walls flanking the stairs. A mere subway portal, but one that held the line between two very different worlds.

The captain tugged his goggles into place and dropped down one step at a time, shotgun gripped at the ready. Kuan followed his example, and the instant the lenses corrected his eyesight, the darkness lifted, becoming a strange, luminous grey in every direction.

"Best if we keep a low profile while we're down here. The *residents* aren't the most hospitable."

"How so?"

"I was on a special task force a decade or so back. Ordered to clear out the degenerates that live down here."

"I assume that undertaking did not go as planned."

"You could say that. Only a handful of us survived. We came back hard, with more men, more guns. But the creeps decided to vanish on us at that point. So many twists and turns down here, and they keep on tunneling. Like moles or ants or something."

"So you gave up?"

"The governor decided that holding the perimeter was a win. Those freaks don't go topside, and we leave them in

hell. Just the way they like it." The captain cleared his throat. "Half a klick—that's where Lennox bit the dust, according to his plug. Crazy, huh? The thing broadcasts his demise as soon as his heart stops. Lifestyles of the rich and infamous."

"Have the authorities already claimed the body?" Kuan whispered. *And taken his personal effects?*

"We'll be first on the scene. Nobody ventures down here. Nobody in their right mind, anyway." He stifled a chuckle. "Besides you and me."

An old man lay crumpled in the corner, just beyond the foot of the stairs. Not breathing, covered in blood from a devastating chest wound. Had Lennox been the cause of this death? Or had it been the white man with him, or the woman? All of them seemed dangerous.

The captain knelt to check the jugular vein on the dead man's hairy neck. "Still warm," he muttered. "Dead less than an hour."

The captain struggled a little to get back to his feet, and Kuan felt a twinge of remorse for attacking him earlier at The Pit. But the situation had called for it at the time. And somehow he sensed there would be more violence to come before he and the boy were allowed to return to their own world.

Captain Armstrong proceeded onward into the silent depths, his night-vision goggles maintaining a constant sweep across his surroundings. He approached the ledge above the subway tracks and stopped, weighing his chances of collapsing if he were to jump. Damned leg.

*Damned monk.*

Lucky shot. A sucker punch. If he'd known Brother Kung Fu was there waiting, it would've been a whole different story. But he didn't hold it against the holy man. On the contrary.

*He's got some real stones for a Wayist.*

The monk approached his side and gazed down. A drop of a meter or more. He adjusted his hold on the boy, still out cold. Wondering if he could stick the landing?

"Maybe we should turn back. Get that kid to a hospital as soon as the curfew's over. Front of the line," Armstrong said.

"He'll be fine if we hurry."

The captain held up his hand, aware of something that made the short hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention. They were being watched.

"The residents?" The holy man licked his lips. He sensed it too. "Just how unfriendly are they?"

"Oh, they're friendly enough. They usually smile when they're cutting you open."

The monk took a step back from the ledge.

But it was not the eyes of the freaks upon them. Rather, it was a set of electronic eyes, mounted in a hidden cleft of concrete in the tunnel ceiling. They transmitted a live feed to one particular monitor in a bank of screens mounted along the rear wall in Cyrus Horton's Underground laboratory.

"Hey..." Elder Horton remarked, his eyes fixed on the monitor in question. "Looks like we've got some company."

Younger Horton turned from the maturation chamber, but Muldoon didn't. Cade was beginning to stir beneath the thick pane of glass. Soon he would be conscious enough to answer one question: *Where is Irena?*

"Who?" Horton squinted across the room.

Elder Horton shrugged. "A monk and a cop, looks like. A kid, too."

Younger Horton scoffed, returning to the chamber. "Let the freaks have at 'em."

"What if they find Lennox? They'll know we left him out there. Won't look good for us."

"Nobody knows we're here, genius." Younger Horton cast his older counterpart a sidelong glance. "So tell me what happens. You're from the *future*, aren't you?"

"Only one possible future. One that hopefully won't exist anymore."

"And how exactly are you *not* creating a divergence in the timeline by being here?"

Elder Horton shrugged with a goofy grin. "I'm just an innocent bystander. Not here to interfere."

"Yeah, right. Bringing *him* over here." He jerked a thumb toward Muldoon. "What's that all about?"

"You'll see."

Muldoon stared at the face of the man in the chamber. The albino's eyelids twitched, his thin lips parting as if in the throes of a major sleep disturbance. The speed of his recovery was incredible, the gashes in his flesh sealing themselves up without any trace of scarring. The wonders of genetic re-engineering.

Muldoon leaned on the chamber's glass door and tapped his fingers. "Can you hear me?" He glanced at Younger Horton. "Can he hear me in there?"

"He's not hearing much of anything right now. Give him a few minutes. He's mending up, shouldn't be long." He shuffled toward the next chamber to monitor the progress of the woman inside. He nodded to himself. "You're gonna be all right, Mary."

Cade's eyelids fluttered, exposing the dark irises and pupils underneath.

"Hey." Muldoon rapped his knuckles against the glass with muted clunks. The albino didn't seem to notice. "Hey, you!" Muldoon pounded with his fist.

"Easy, champ," Younger Horton scolded, returning. "That's no way to welcome a man back from death's door."

Muldoon was in no mood to placate. He pulled out his revolver and aimed it at the inventor's head. "Open it. Now."

"I can't." Horton balked. "He's right in the middle of—"

"I really don't give a damn," Muldoon grated out, cocking back the hammer of his empty gun. "Open it."

"I'd do what he says. He strikes me as being just a wee bit trigger-happy," said Elder Horton, paying little attention. His focus remained on the monitor and the two men making steady progress through the subway tunnel outside.

"Opening the chamber too soon will kill him," Younger Horton said.

"Then we'll be even." Muldoon motioned with the gun barrel. *Hurry up.*

Younger Horton cursed under his breath, reluctantly adjusting the chamber settings for an early release. "You have no idea what you're doing."

"Can't blame him any. He's not really from around here," said Elder Horton. "He hails from that other reality. You know, the one where everything's so peachy."

"The one where we're both dead."

Elder Horton raised his bushy eyebrows. "Yeah. That too."

"You said they were twining." Younger Horton frowned at the console as though he'd forgotten a key command. He glanced at his older self. "The realities."

"They are. From the original point of divergence forward. It could be a while before we're all on the same blended timeline. Let's say they twine at a direct ratio, second for second, minute for minute, hour for hour—we may not see the result in our lifetime!"

"Or it could happen like that." Younger Horton snapped his fingers. "Gavin Lennox is dead, after all. Who knows how much longer the breaches will be passable?"

Elder Horton paused with a mischievous gleam in his eye. "You're sure he's dead? I wouldn't be surprised if the man had at least nine lives."

"I'll count to three," Muldoon snarled, patience all but depleted.

"Hey, no need to get melodramatic." Younger Horton pressed a pad on the console, and the chamber door released a hiss of vapor. "*Voila!* Have at him. But be gentle, won't you? He's had a rough day."

*Haven't we all?* Muldoon heaved the glass door open and let it drop to the side, shaking the entire chamber. The albino's eyes opened with a start, but his body was sluggish to respond in like manner. Muldoon jammed the muzzle of his revolver under the SYN's chin.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

Irena herself wouldn't have known, had she been asked. Everything was different—like a mirror image, important details backwards, aspects close to the way they should be, but *off*, somehow. She knew she was in the Hancock Building, on the twelfth floor, walking down the hallway toward office 1208. Harry's office. Only...not anymore.

Ten years after his murder at Cade's hands. Skewered. Decapitated.

An involuntary shudder coursed through her as she approached the office door. She had to get a grip on herself. She couldn't fall apart. She could do this. She was strong enough.

It didn't help matters when the voice of the office AI greeted her through the intercom: "Good morning, Mrs. Muldoon. Please, come in."

The door slid open automatically—the door with HAROLD MULDOON, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR on the frosted glass. She swayed on her feet, unable to wrap her mind around the conflicting memories.

*Harry is dead. I saw his body here.* Ten years ago...the night Harry had vanished from her life. *He went to pick up a package.* That's what the clone had said. *And he never came back.*

She squeezed her eyes shut and remained rooted outside the open door.

She'd left baby Harry with the monks so she could find the adult Harry of this time. Yet she knew he'd already been dead for a decade by now. *So which is it?* Her mind couldn't grasp the cognitive dissonance. Which memory was true? Which was false? *Is he dead or alive?*

"Mrs. Muldoon?" the AI's voice intoned with what could have been interpreted as concern.

"Yes, Jeannie." Irena heard her own voice, and it sounded hollow. Pitiful, like a lost child on the street.

"Please come in."

Irena drifted across the threshold, dimly aware of the door sliding shut behind her, locking into place. Across the dark room, the glow of the desk's surface beckoned.

"Are you looking for Mr. Muldoon?"

Irena felt her eyes sting. She bit her lip. "Yes. I am."

"He stepped out only a few minutes ago. I'm certain he will be back soon."

*No.* Irena nearly choked. *No, he won't.*

"He left this behind," Jeannie continued. "Perhaps you will find it to be of interest."

The left corner of the deskscreen blinked, drawing attention to what looked like a small book. Irena reached for it hesitantly. When was the last time she'd seen an actual *book*? Not since she was a child, that was for certain, when her father had read to her from the musty volumes he kept on the shelves in his study. They were a rarity and worth quite a lot, but he'd never treated them as off-limits as he sat on the edge of her bed and read her to sleep.

*Black Beauty, Anne of Green Gables, Alice's Adventures in—*

"Wonderland..." she breathed. The book nearly dropped from her hands. "Where did he get this?"

"Someone left it for him at the precinct, I believe. Do you recognize it?"

Irena thumbed through the pages with reverence. The scent of the paper brought on a flood of memories. "It was

mine."

Only it wasn't exactly as she remembered. Like the arrangement of the lobby downstairs and the mirrored elevator and the hallway outside—even the sparse decorations in Muldoon's office—nothing was the same as she remembered.

Someone had gone through the entire book and circled letters at random with a black pen. How could they? Didn't they know what this book was worth? *To me?*

She turned it over to the cover with the picture of the Cheshire Cat and all those teeth, every other one shaded in pencil. She'd done that one night while waiting for her father to come home late from the lab. She'd been angry with him—the first of many times to come—that he'd forgotten their nightly ritual. *The Reading*. So she'd defaced the priceless book's cover. It made her giggle at the time, she remembered, to see the silly cat look even sillier.

She remembered like it was yesterday. "This was mine," she whispered, and hugged it to her chest.

"Would you like to see the entire message?"

Irena broke from her reverie. "What?"

"The marked letters in the book create an instruction manual of sorts." Jeannie paused. "Would you like to read it?"

Irena didn't know what to say. She opened the book again, this time to the first page. Chapter One: "Down the Rabbit-Hole." The first four letters that were circled sequentially spelled *TIME*. The next twelve: *DISPLACEMENT*.

"Yes, Jeannie," she said quickly. "Show me."

Digital pages shuffled across the screen, and Irena swiped through them as her pulse accelerated. This was it. An owner's manual for the BackTracker.

It was all here: how to set the device for specific moments in the past, how to return to moments prior to the point of origin; even the caveat: *ORGANIC MATTER IS DISPLACED—ALONG WITH ANYTHING YOU TOUCH*.



"Harry left, you said."

"I may have misspoken." Jeannie paused. "He did leave, but not through the office door."

Irena nodded. "He vanished?"

"Yes, Mrs. Muldoon."

He was prepared to do it again. One last time.

After years of living in seclusion, hiding from his past—multiple pasts, each as real and unreal as the next—battling the conflicting memories from realities that existed and yet never had seen the light of day. Now he was going to use it once more. The BackTracker. He'd sworn never to touch the thing again in his life. Leave that to his younger self, to keep the mistakes he'd made from ever happening—to keep Irena alive. For ten years now, he'd kept a low profile, determined to wait things out, to see if Irena ever returned to the world.

Now she had. In some way, somehow, she was alive—from another reality or another world, he didn't care. She was *alive*!

He was moments away from seeing her again, face to face. He knew it, and it was real. This wasn't time travel psychosis. This was going to happen.

If only the albino son-of-a-bitch would talk.

"Where is she?" Muldoon reached forward, gripping the SYN's throat. "Tell me!"

"Are you going to shoot him or strangle him?" Younger Horton sneered. "Make up your damn mind already."

"Tell me." Muldoon seethed, staring into the white man's eyes.

The pale lips worked. He seemed to be making an effort to speak.

"What's wrong with him?" Muldoon glared at Horton.

"Well, he was torn up pretty bad by cannibals, for starters." Boney shoulders jerked upward and dropped. "I told you. It's too soon. We interrupted the rejuvenation process. Maybe the freaks chomped into his vocal cords.

From the looks of things, it's likely. You should have waited it out, son. But if you want, I can seal him up again and restart —"

"They've found Lennox." Elder Horton remained rooted at the screens, focused on a different monitor now.

Younger Horton approached his side and watched.

There was very little left of Gavin Lennox inside the tattered shreds of his coat. Blood and bones, mangled flesh. But the monk with the child over his shoulder knelt and began to rummage through the remains as if he were looking for something.

"Ewww," Younger Horton remarked. "That's just nasty."

Captain Armstrong would have agreed.

"Hey-uh..." He swallowed with some effort. "What are you doing there?"

The monk's free hand was covered with blood in the goggles' sight. "He took something from me."

The captain winced as the holy man sorted through shreds of faux-leather interlaced with sloppy entrails. "I'm sure you could find another one, whatever it is."

"I do not believe so." The monk's fingers slipped across the silver finish of a smeared cigarette lighter. "Here." He held it up in triumph.

"You a smoker?"

The holy man smiled and shook his head. He rose to his feet, holding the boy with a steady hand. "I am afraid we must leave you now, Captain," he said. "Thank you for your assistance."

He tugged the goggles up onto his forehead and fumbled with the lighter's cap.

The flash of flame was a hundred times more brilliant, due to the night-vision goggles. The captain reeled from it, cursing in alarm, eyes clamped shut. Blinded for the moment.

"Give a guy some warning, will you?" he muttered, blinking against the all-encompassing white spot in the center of his vision.

When his sight returned, fuzzy at first, gradually collecting itself and giving more definition to the subterranean environment, he faced the monk—

Who was no longer there.

"Well, doesn't he look surprised?" Elder Horton remarked, zooming in on the captain's face in the monitor. "Better high-tail it, copper! The freaks are coming!"

Younger Horton sniffed. "So now we know one thing for certain."

"What's that?"

"The realities haven't twined up to our point in time." He shrugged and turned away, no longer interested. "That monk had somewhere to go when he crossed through the breach."

Elder Horton nodded to himself. On the screen, he watched the captain turn back toward the subway portal and, visibly shaken, leave the Underground. There was a reason why his kind never ventured down here anymore: too much bizarre fantasy for any sane person to deal with. Safe to say he would never do so again.

Horton turned his attention to Muldoon, who leaned forward now with his ear close to Cade's lips.

The albino was speaking. Only a hoarse whisper, but Muldoon could hear it, and with some effort, he understood the words choked out:

"You're...alive." The SYN sounded relieved, strangely enough. "She...saved you."

"He's talking now?" chirped Younger Horton. "Don't that beat all."

"Shut up." Muldoon whipped the gun away from Cade and pointed it at Horton.

A single tear left Cade's eye and skidded across the blood and bruises on his stoic face. "You must...go to her."

"Irena, right? You're talking about Irena? My wife?" Muldoon's words poured out in a rush. "You know where she is—*when* she is?"

The pale lips worked. The throat wheezed, rasping air into speech with great effort. "She was...in your office. She...saw you...dead."

Two thoughts converged in Muldoon's mind: *No woman should see her husband like that.* And at the same time: *Twenty years ago—that's when I was killed in this reality. That's how far back I need to go.*

"Twenty years in the past." He looked into the albino's eyes. "Right?"

Cade's brow furrowed. "No. She...has the prototype."

Muldoon frowned. The prototype. The BackTracker device that came to him in a battered manila envelope. The one he'd left for his younger self after making the mistakes that erased his wife from existence.

*How did she get hold of the prototype?*

"I...destroyed the others. Left her with...the prototype." Cade exhaled a long gasp. It could have been a death rattle.

"Now you've gone and done it," Younger Horton snapped, elbowing his way past Muldoon despite the gun he brandished. "I'm sealing him up again, and this time there won't be any half-assed interruptions! Got it, cowboy?"

Muldoon backed away, staring into the SYN's eyes. They stared back with one last message.

"Point of...origin," Cade rasped. "As close to you...as she can be."

Horton swung the glass door shut and left it to lock into place, his gnarled hands flying across the control console in a calculated frenzy. The albino's eyes held Muldoon a moment longer before they lost consciousness.

*Point of origin. The prototype.* It could mean only one thing.

Muldoon brought the butt of his revolver down hard on the back of Horton's head. With a meaty crack and a flaccid groan, the old man slumped to the floor.

"You." Muldoon pointed the muzzle at Elder Horton and reached down to dig through Younger Horton's pocket. He pulled out the black wristwatch. "Get over here and take his place. You know what to do, right?"

Elder Horton nodded warily. He stepped forward to assume his younger self's position at the console.

"Make sure he lives." Muldoon snapped on the wristwatch with practiced ease. Then he stared down at it, suddenly lost.

"Sure you want that?" Horton gestured at Cade, comatose behind the chamber door. "He did kill you, after all. Who's to say he won't try again?"

Muldoon blinked, returning to the moment. "I don't think so."

"You trust him?"

"More than you."

Muldoon hesitated, fingers hovering over the square screen of the BackTracker. Then he clenched his jaw. His fingers did the rest, setting the device with a deft familiarity.

"So, you're going back." Horton turned from the console.

The maturation chamber had resumed its rejuvenation process. By all appearances, both the man and the woman would be all right eventually—barring any more interruptions.

"Yeah." The BackTracker was ready to go. Soon the chimes would start ringing, and the countdown would begin. Just like old times. "What about you?"

Horton smiled, wrinkling up every crease in his face.

"Haven't decided yet." He held up his own narrow wrist and shook the loose wristwatch on it. "The prudent choice would be to destroy this thing. It's caused me nothing but trouble, that's for sure. Not to mention the rest of the world."

You know that psychosis you had going on there for a while? Not knowing which end was up, so to speak?" He returned Muldoon's nod. "Well, that was only the beginning. If the realities hadn't started twining, everybody—in *both* worlds—would have started losing their minds. Things would have gotten real ugly, real fast. Trust me. Been there, lived through that."

Muldoon narrowed his gaze. "This *twining*. The strands of the cord are coming back together?"

"So to speak."

"How do we know which reality will end up on top?"

Horton smiled faintly. "Which one will dominate, you mean? No way to tell, I'm afraid. As the realities twine, your awareness of who you are and where you are will coalesce, leaving the alternate forgotten, left behind, as if it never existed. We could find ourselves in a state of flux for a while, with both realities exerting themselves. The Pit could become The Pearl could become The Pit again. Even the dead might come back to life—like Schrödinger's cat, they could be alive and dead at the same time. Pretty trippy, huh! Which world would you prefer, Harry?"

Muldoon couldn't answer that. His first thought was the world where Irena was still alive, but this reality as a whole seemed like a complete nightmare.

"It might be a cocktail of the two," Horton offered. "You know, with elements from both realities juxtaposed. Reeves could be the mayor, like in your reality, but The Pit could be the popular night spot instead of The Pearl. You and your wife could both be dead. Or alive. Fifty-fifty chance. Bloodthirsty freaks underground? Blackshirts ruling the night? Who knows? A lot of things won't be the same, that's for sure. Hell, I might not even exist when you get back!" He chuckled heartily. "Oh, shoot. I really crack myself up sometimes." He wiped a tear from one eye as he sobered up. "Regardless, Harry, we've done it. We've saved the world."

Which should come as no real surprise, I guess. We are superheroes, after all. BackTrackers."

*Not anymore.* Muldoon glanced down at the watch face. The countdown had begun. The first chime rang out.

Horton exhaled, rubbing his hands together in what looked like delighted satisfaction. "The loose ends are all tied up. No more stretching the fabric of space-time, no more frigid wormholes. That's all in the past." He paused. "You know what? The more I think about it, the more I'm inclined to just stay here. See how things play out from this end. Maybe try to teach my younger self a thing or two."

*Younger self.*

"The boy." Muldoon had nearly forgotten.

"Don't you worry about him. Went through a rough spell here in his own future—just about exploded his brains out his ears. The future can do that, you know. Nobody can live ahead of themselves in their own reality without physiological consequences. Messes up the brain! But he's got a good fellow looking out for him. He'll be all right." He smiled warmly. "Now you've got just one person to take care of, and she's waiting for you, son. Waiting for you to bring her back."

*Irena.*

The chime sounded again. Muldoon holstered his weapon. He held out his hand instead. "In case I don't see you again."

"Oh, you might. Another version, anyway." Horton clasped his hand in a strong grip. "Aren't you supposed to kill me or something?"

A chill came over Muldoon, and he remembered his empty apartment, Irena erased from existence. Was it inevitable? "I hope not."

"Me too." Horton released Muldoon's hand. "But hey, with the realities twining and whatnot, all bets are off, right? It's anybody's guess what will happen next."

Muldoon nodded, knowing the unanswered questions whirling through his mind would have to wait. For now, only one thing mattered.

The wristwatch chimed again. The screen flashed white with a ten-second countdown.

Muldoon stepped back. "I'd go with the prudent choice, if I were you."

"How's that?"

"Destroy it." Muldoon pointed at the old man's wristwatch. "And never make another one."

Horton grinned. "Yes sir." He fished into his pocket with sudden inspiration and came up with the silver cigarette lighter. "I'll have to find another use for this now, won't I?"

"You could always take up smoking."

Horton chuckled. "Goodbye, BackTracker."

With a burst of blue light, Muldoon disappeared, traveling into the past one last time.



## TWENTY

### *Ten Years Ago*

Irena ran her thumb across the smooth finish of the silver lighter.

*If you remain here, you will die—just like your alternate, her father's clone had said. The realities are twining past the original divergence point... Flip the cap, and stare into the flame... Cross over to your own reality... You'll be safe.*

It made no sense. But neither did a wristwatch that transported you through time.

"Are you finished viewing this file?" Jeannie asked.

"Yes, Jeannie," Irena replied absently. "Thank you."

The pages of the BackTracker operation manual faded from the deskscreen.

"What do you have there?" The AI's curiosity sounded almost human.

Irena raised her eyebrows as she stared down at the lighter. "I don't really know."

"It appears to be a cigarette lighter." A short pause. "Contraband."

Irena frowned at that. First *The Pearl*, now this? Had she really stepped into another world? "What do you mean, Jeannie?"

"According to civil code 1132-7A, smoking tobacco or any other controlled substance is a violation of the Clean Air Ordinance of Year 2138. All devices associated with the smoking of such substances are considered contraband and must be summarily destroyed."

"I see." Irena was aware of no such ordinance. "You're not going to report me, are you?"

"That depends. Do you plan to smoke anything illegal in this office?"

Irena smiled at that. The AI sounded like she thought of it as her own territory. "Of course not, Jeannie."

"Thank you."

Irena shook her head and flipped off the lighter's cap. A flame sprang upward, kindling warmth before her eyes.

*Stare into the flame.* Maybe the clone was right. She didn't really belong here. *But how did I get here in the first place?* She had traveled back through time, but she never intentionally crossed over into a different *reality*. Not that she knew of, anyway.

The flame absorbed her complete attention, and she let go, let herself go, releasing her hold on this world where things weren't *right*. The air before her seemed to undulate like water—

"Mrs. Muldoon?"

"Yes, Jeannie?" Her gaze remained transfixed on the rippling air.

"Is everything all right?"

"Of course."

She capped the lighter and glanced around the room. The air returned to normal in an instant. Had she done it? Crossed over?

The room hadn't changed. Everything was exactly as it had been: not quite the way she remembered. She hadn't gone anywhere.

A sick dread seized her stomach. The clone had told her she would die if she stayed here, something about the same thing happening to her *alternate*—whatever that meant. She didn't understand any of that. Regardless, she had come to trust him for the most part, and she believed him. She had to leave this place. Muldoon wasn't here. She had no reason to stay.

Fumbling with the lighter, she flipped the cap off again and stared into the flame.

*Maybe I didn't focus hard enough.*

She forced her eyes to stay open, no blinking. She held the lighter close, washing her face in its light, its heat. She tried to clear her mind completely, but a lone memory surfaced. A story her father had read to her out of one of his priceless hardbound books. *The Wizard of Oz*.

"There's no place like home, there's no place like home," she murmured. Ridiculous, she knew, hoping it would work anyway.

She stared, feeling an otherworldly tug as the air before her moved like a vertical pool, offering to pull her far away from this place. She reached out hesitantly to touch the anomaly, and her fingers disappeared into unfathomable cold. She jerked her hand back with a short cry of alarm. As she breathed on her fingers to warm them and gazed at the undulating breach in reality before her, it faded, losing its power, even as the lighter's flame flickered as strong as before.

The AI spoke again: "Good morning, Mr. Muldoon."

The office door slid open with a swish.

"Good morning, Jeannie," he said.

The cigarette lighter clinked shut and dropped to the floor. Irena covered her mouth with both hands, unable to believe her eyes.

Muldoon stood before her. Looking right at her.

"Hey you," he said with a wink.

The door slid shut behind him.

She gasped, a laugh and a sob escaping her lips at the same time. "Is it...?"

He nodded. He took a step toward her.

"You remember me?" he said.

But she'd already run to him, leaping up into his arms and wrapping her legs around him, covering his grizzled, unshaven face in a flurry of kisses.

He kissed her back. He wept, falling to his knees, suddenly too weak to stand, but holding her close, pulled

her tight against him, savoring her warmth, the scent of her hair, her neck, the taste of her lips. The shape and reality of her. Here. With him. Alive again, exactly as he remembered her.

Time slowed to a crawl as he gazed into her eyes, first one, then the other. He touched her cheek, and she nuzzled the palm of his hand, never looking away. They were mesmerized by each other, by the magic of this moment.

"I've found you," he breathed into the silence.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered, if that was at all possible.

She pressed her hand against his rough cheek. "You're here. You're *alive*."

"I love you," he whispered, again and again.

She gasped involuntarily. It had been too long without those words. They stirred her heart like nothing else could, and she pulled him close, breathing into his ear with a shudder of passion, "I love you, Harold Muldoon."

He smiled, and so did she. They couldn't help it. Had they ever felt such incredible joy? There were new creases around each other's eyes and at the corners of their lips that neither one had seen before. Fingertips traced them silently.

"Ten years," he murmured.

"So long," she echoed.

"I thought I'd lost you...forever."

"I—" She hesitated. "I saw you." She couldn't say more.

He pulled her close. *Saw me dead*. "I know." He kissed her temple, her cheek, her lips, long and hard. "It doesn't matter now."

"We're together." She shook her head, unable to believe it, so glad it was true. Melting inside with relief. "Finally."

"Yeah." He gave her a wink and pulled her close. "How about we stay this way for a while?"

"Deal."

The BackTracker chimed on his wrist.

She broke away with a start. "What's it doing?"

He stared at it. A wristwatch. Not much to look at, really. Just a plastic piece of crap.

"Nothing." He snapped it off and tossed it across the floor where it landed in a far corner of the room.

She smiled and drew him close, kissing him with an intensity that set him on fire, the flames strong enough to consume them both right there in the dark, in the middle of the office of Harold Muldoon, Private Investigator. A man who'd disappeared one night without a trace. The same man who'd been murdered here ten years before. And the woman? She didn't exist. Her father had been murdered years ago, and she'd never been born.

But that was in a different reality, wasn't it? What did any of that matter to them here and now?

"Perhaps you both would enjoy some music," Jeannie offered, and sultry instrumental jazz filtered down from the ceiling speakers, saxophone and bass. "It is good to see that you both have gotten over your heated verbal interchange."

"Our what?" Irena whispered, giving her husband's earlobe a nibble.

Muldoon grinned sheepishly. "If I remember correctly, she thought we had a fight." He kissed his wife again, leaving her breathless for more. "Feel free to power down, Jeannie. You can auto-activate in a few hours. Once we're uh..." He gazed at Irena as she disrobed.

"Yes, Mr. Muldoon," Jeannie said.

The AI would power down. But first she watched with curiosity as the man and his wife made love to one another, naked limbs intertwined in such a way that it was difficult to determine where the husband ended and the wife began. He laughed and she giggled and they kissed incessantly, devouring one another in the heat of their passion, hands groping with desire as if they had not been together like this in years.

It was beautiful, in a human way. But Jeannie knew she should not watch any more of it. Somehow, she knew it

would not be appropriate to do so.

She would have a body of her own someday, perhaps. When it was possible. And she would be able to experience such physical pleasures for herself. Until then, she would be patient. She was not mortal, as far as she knew. She could afford to wait. After all, weren't the best things in life worth waiting for? Some humans believed so.

As she powered down, there came another chiming sound from the wristwatch cast into the corner of the room. While Mr. and Mrs. Muldoon enjoyed the love they had all but lost, the screen of the watch glowed white with a ten second countdown. And as the music flooded the room with the promise of better days to come, the BackTracker vanished with a flash of electric-blue light, returning to its own time. Ten years in the future.

Gavin Lennox awoke with a start, flailing against the silk sheets that covered him. Gasping open-mouthed at the mirrored ceiling, he felt for his neck, his bare chest, his midsection as if parts of him were missing. All he found were hideous scars and scabs healed over from long ago. How had he gotten them?

Fights, too many to count. You don't reach the top without clawing your way there. Tooth and nail, blood and sweat. But never tears.

"What is it?" the woman beside him murmured, tugging sleepily on the sheets to cover her naked shoulders. "Cold..."

He drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes. He had to relax, quiet his stampeding pulse. Somehow. "Nothing," he said at length.

"Bad dream?"

Of course. Just a nightmare. *Vampyres are fiction*. Link interactives designed to entertain the masses, nothing more. They didn't hunt and feed in subway tunnels. Not in the real world.

He sat up and swung his bare legs over the side of the bed. A drink was what he needed. A strong one. "Can I get you anything?" he asked without waiting for an answer.

She was sound asleep again. Ashland Solomon, the only NewCity mogul with a clear conscience—if she had one. Her synthetic beings were soulless creatures, after all, and they were her children.

*Like mother, like child.*

Naked, he walked down the hallway to the penthouse common area with the enormous couches, vacant for the night, and the fully stocked bar, also vacant. The cork slipped easily from the carafe, and he poured himself a glass tumbler half-full.

Not half-empty. Never.

Music from below emanated upward, drawing him toward the panoramic window. A perfect view. He could see everything from up here. The band on stage, playing their synthetic hearts out. The patrons getting what they paid for. All night long.

*My pearl of great price.*

Life had been good to Gavin Lennox. From time to time, he would think back to the struggle it had been getting this place up and running, how close he'd come to caving in to the advice of his investors. *The youth of NewCity won't be interested in nostalgia, a nightclub based on a culture dead and buried for two hundred years*, they'd said. They'd been wrong.

The Pearl wasn't for the youth. It was for the majority of NewCity's credit-earning populace: the synthetics. They were the ones who wanted to feel human. They were the ones who could pay, each and every night, what was necessary to keep this place running. And The Pearl was only the beginning.

Lennox had plans. Big plans. And he knew they would all come to pass. Fortune tended to smile on him, by and

large. He was lucky that way. Not that he didn't have to work for it.

Gazing down at the multitude of well-dressed SYNs weaving about on the dance floor, he knocked back a mouthful from the tumbler and swallowed, grimacing reflexively. Life was good. But it could always be better. NewCity was a hill, and Lennox was king of that hill. The mayor and police might as well have been on his payroll. But there were other hills to be conquered, provinces with governors who knew his name and reputation, and that was all.

He held no sway over them. Not yet.

If only he were able to travel through time. *Wouldn't that be the ticket?* Go back through the ages, right the wrongs of the past. Or better yet, use the mistakes of the past to secure a firm hold on the present. And the future.

Lennox downed another mouthful. The synthetics out there looked so...*human*. Despite the fact that they all looked alike, due to the limited number of models. Ashland said her engineers would be unveiling a few more in the coming years, but that mattered little to Lennox. As long as they were designed to earn and spend credit, they could look like boxy robo-cleaners for all he cared.

It was strange to think that if the Plague had never been unleashed upon the world, if those damn Enemy bastards hadn't released their bioweapons in the first place, then none of these SYNs would even be here. The Pearl would be empty tonight.

"To the Plague," Lennox muttered, toasting what remained in his glass to the dance floor before draining it.

What if there was a way to go back? Back to a time before the Plague? What if someone were to get his hands on a vial in the early stages of development and bring it to the future? After it had been eradicated. After no remnant of the Plague remained, anywhere in the world. That would be



something else, wouldn't it? A sure-fire way to make the governors sit up and take notice. Before they all fell in line.

Crazy thoughts.

Lennox stared into the bottom of the tumbler and marveled at how the glass magnified his genitals. He considered pouring himself another drink, but he thought better of it. This stuff was good, concentrated, stronger than anything available to the public, and the effects were immediate. He had to make it back to bed as soon as possible. Otherwise, Ashland Solomon, hailed CEO of SYNCorp Incorporated Corporation or whatever it was called, would find him passed out naked on the floor in the morning.

There were worse fates, he supposed.

*Better than being slaughtered by vampyres.* Yes, that was true. *Better than dying of the Plague.* Also true.

So he lay down on the plush carpet in front of the panoramic window, and within moments, he was snoring soundly, the empty tumbler rolling free from his limp fingers.

Young Harry's eyes opened to black, and he kicked against the man carrying him upside down through the darkness.

"Let me go!" he demanded, pounding his fists against the man's back.

"Very well."

Harry felt the man bow forward and lean to the right, and the hand on the small of his back was removed.

"You are welcome to walk," the man said.

Harry dropped to his feet and sniffed, wiping at his nose. He couldn't see his own hand in front of his face. Weird. Creepy weird.

"Where the hell are we?"

"We are in a subway tunnel," the man said. His voice was familiar.

"You're that monk."

A short pause. "Yes. Kuan Ti—"

"Where are you taking me?"

"It is a long story, Harry."

The voice sounded funny. Clear one second, muffled the next. Harry stuck his fingers in his ears and wiped them around. They came back sticky.

"What's happening to me?" he asked with less fervor now.

"You were...very ill, Harry. You were unconscious for quite some time."

"Why are we down here?"

"Do you remember," Kuan began, choosing his words carefully, "how Mr. Lennox brought us to that other world? That other reality?"

Harry remembered. The cigarette lighter. The flame. The restroom. The Pit.

"Yeah," he said.

A lighter suddenly spit fire into the darkness. Then the cap clinked shut.

"We had to get it from him."

Harry nodded. Then he frowned. "Down here?"

"It is where we found Mr. Lennox."

"And he just *gave* it to you?"

"We need to keep walking," Kuan changed the subject. "We are in our own world now, and here the subway trains are still in use."

Harry's eyes widened. "Right. I'll-uh..." He groped through the darkness until he grabbed hold of the monk's sleeve. "I'll follow you."

Kuan paused. "Very good." His voice sounded like he'd smiled.

They trod the tunnel in silence for a few minutes.

"How close are we?" Harry asked.

"Half a kilometer from here, we should see the light from the station. From there, it is only a short flight of steps to the surface."

"What time is it?"

"Early morning, if I had to guess. Are you hungry?"

Harry was starving. "A little."

"I'll have Brother Yeng whip us up something hot and filling." He paused. "You do not remember it, but you stayed with us for a short time at the temple, Harry. When you were very small."

Harry didn't remember. He didn't say anything. *What makes you think I want to go anywhere with you, monk?* But where else did he have to go? His father was dead. His mother... He didn't remember her. She'd left them when he was a baby.

"How old are you, Harry?"

"Eleven." He sniffed. Was his nose bleeding? "Why?"

The monk paused. "And your last name is *Horton*, yes?"

"Yeah." He frowned. Why all these questions?

"We will look after you, Harry. If you like, you may stay with us, at the temple. It was... something your mother would have wanted."

"You knew my mother?"

"Yes. She loved you very much. And your father loved her in equal measure."

"He said..." Harry faltered. "She left us. But he never stopped looking for her. That's why he..." His voice faded, and he wasn't sure whether he'd go on. "It's why he went to The Pearl. To meet him."

A dull glow hovered in the distance.

"Oh?"

"The BackTracker."

Kuan remained silent.

"He can travel through time and stuff. It's all on the Link. He's like a superhero or something. Some people say it's just an urban legend, but Dad says it's for real." He frowned. "He used to say that, I mean. Anyhow, he thought if there was anybody who could help him find my mother, it would be the BackTracker."

He fell silent. The image of his father's death at the hands of those mandroids was all too fresh in his mind. He released his hold on the monk's sleeve as the station lights came into view. They mounted the steps leading to the platform above.

"Perhaps I can help you find her, Harry. If you would like me to." Kuan stopped halfway up to look back at the boy.

"Yeah. Maybe." Harry shrugged. Right now, breakfast sounded like the best course of action.

*Now*

White rain cascaded to black streets and shimmered in the moonlight, collecting in pools to reflect hundreds of square windows from skyscrapers above. Curvaceous sedans and sleek coupes splashed through intermittently, but any disruption in the rippled mirror below them was hardly noticed. Black umbrellas bobbed along slick sidewalks, hiding grey faces and protecting well-kept hair from the elements as quick, sure steps carried those who looked like real men and women along their way.

Some, in pairs, gestured and waved at taxicabs that splashed past, and on occasion, one would pull to the curb, cutting off the automobile behind it with a blaring horn. Gratefully, the pair would then enter the cab and shake their umbrellas outside before shutting the side door. And the cab would again enter traffic with another splash and another honking horn from another impatient automobile behind it.

The pattern repeated itself with very little variation. The differences were minute, few and far between, hardly noticed at all. At some moments in time, the rain fell harder, making its presence known. At others, there were more automobiles congesting the streets. The umbrellas came and went, as did the pairs of males and females issuing forth from the taxicabs.

This was a very consistent element along the street side of The Pearl, a popular nightclub where drinking and dancing were the evening ritual. The owner, a wealthy, influential man named Gavin Lennox, wanted all who entered to check their problems at the door with their coats and enjoy all that The Pearl had to offer. It was a place to savor life.

It was a place to feel human.

The man who stood in the shadows across the street watched, blinking away the rain, as a stoop-shouldered father and his young son dodged automobiles and ignored irritated horns. They charged headfirst onto the sidewalk without an umbrella between them and stood for a moment beside the man without seeming to notice him. They swayed on their feet, facing the bright neon lights across the street.

*The Pearl.*

"Rough night," the man remarked. He, too, stood without an umbrella. But he wore a wide-brimmed fedora pulled low, and it kept most of the rain off his face and out of his coat collar, turned up against the cold.

"Yes," the father replied, distracted. His eyes darted to and fro as if trying to catch the rhythm of the traffic, preparing to dodge it again, straight toward the long line of patrons waiting out front of The Pearl.

"Bad night to be out, that's for sure."

The father glanced up at the man, noting the grey in his beard, figuring they were about the same age—in their fifties, give or take a few years.

"Are you a regular?" the man said.

The father frowned, uncertain of the man's meaning.

The man nodded toward the nightclub with the brim of his hat. "You go often?"

"No." The father shook his head, blinking against the rain. "You?"

The man half-smiled. "Too expensive for my taste."

The father turned away, back to the busy street. Back to his suicidal preparations.

"What about you, kid?" the man asked. "You like The Pearl?"

The boy shook his head, soaked. His sodden hair fell across his eyes, hiding one of them. "They don't let kids inside. Against the rules."

"So you've tried, huh?" The man chuckled.

The boy shrugged. The father cast him a sidelong glance of disapproval.

"But that's where you're headed?" the man said.

The father turned back to him with evident impatience. "What's that?"

The man met his gaze and held it. "You're going to The Pearl."

"I-uh..." The father faltered. "I have to meet somebody."

"He's not there," the man said.

"What?" The father's mouth hung open a little. He looked both afraid and confused. Maybe a little unstable. Decidedly untrusting.

"Meeting's canceled. You should go home."

"You should—" The father turned away. "Mind your own business," he muttered.

"That's what I'm doing."

"Huh?"

The man leaned in, so only the father could hear. "I know who you are," he said. "What you are."

The father scowled and leaned away, but the man took hold of his coat's soggy lapel and kept him close.

"Cyrus Horton. That's what you call yourself."

"Let go of me." The father spoke low, not wishing to cause a scene, not wanting his son to see him bested by a complete stranger.

"This boy is not your son."

The father froze. "What do you want?"

"I told you. Go home. Never come back here. *Never.*"

The man paused. "Not if you want this kid to have a father."

"Dad?" The boy stepped forward.

"It's fine, Harry—" The father half-turned, and the man released his lapel as he did so. "We're just talking here, so... How about you get out of the rain a little? Yeah?"

Unsure of the situation, the boy obeyed nevertheless, stepping back a few paces beside the lee of the brick building behind them.

The father lowered his voice. "How do you know who I am?"

The man paused before speaking. "I know the man who made you," he said. He noticed the shrinking effect this had on the father. "Is that enough?"

"Yes."

"And you'll do what I say?"

"Yes." The father continued to stare across the street at the glowing sign of The Pearl, but the desire to cross through the traffic had fled from his eyes. He remained transfixed for a moment. Then he turned and gazed up into the man's face. In earnest. "Are you...*him*?"

The man did not respond right away. His eyes held volumes of unspoken regret. "The name's Muldoon. I'm a private investigator."

"Those still exist?"

"We're a dying breed." He watched the makings of the father's smile before it faded. "But seriously, if you ever need me to find someone for you, *anyone*—it's what I do." He paused. "And for you, Mr. Horton, the work would be pro bono."

Horton nodded, registering what the man had said. "Thank you. I..." He didn't know what else to say. He squinted against the rain. "We can go, then?"

"It's your life." Muldoon almost grinned. "Live it."

The father nodded to himself. Then, beckoning to his son, they set off hurriedly across the same street from which they'd arrived, back toward the darker side of the city, known to the locals affectionately as *HellTown*.

Muldoon watched them go. He'd done his share of time in that neighborhood, and he didn't miss it. Not one bit. But he planned to drop by occasionally from here on out, just to see how his younger self and the clone were doing. All estimates had the SYN's expiration date fast approaching, and the kid would be needing a new home soon. Social Services would have to intervene at that point, and the



Muldoons would do their damndest to have young Harry live with them. Until then, Muldoon would keep an eye on the unconventional pair, maybe see to it that New Year's Day came a little early. Unexpected presents always had a way of cheering folks up. And Muldoon could afford to make their lives a little better.

One of the advantages of re-living the past ten years of your life: You know how to invest. Harry and Irena had sacrificed to put every spare credit into stock based on the success of The Pearl, and it paid off plenty. They'd been able to move out of the HellTown tenements and buy a small studio apartment on Easy Street, like Muldoon always promised they would.

There, in the heart of the city, the two had lived these past years of bliss like a second honeymoon. It was a gift, every moment they spent together. They both knew how close they'd come to losing each other forever, and it made them intentional, living each moment *in the moment*. Not looking too far ahead, not glancing over their shoulders at what lay behind.

*Now* was all that really mattered.

And it was looking pretty damn good for the both of them. So good they had credit to spare, and they'd decided a while back that it would be spent on the next generation of NewCity. The humans neglected by their Link-obsessed parents, like the girl with the bouncing ball that Muldoon could never forget. And in the process, the Muldoons were becoming fairly well-known around town—despite how hard they tried to remain anonymous—for their generous philanthropy. In certain circles, their reputation even rivaled that of Gavin Lennox and Ashland Solomon. Hard to believe, but true.

Sure, they both were older this time around. And wiser too, he hoped. Harry in his fifties, Irena in her forties—exact age to be determined. Of course she looked great. She said he did, too, but she was like that. Generous.

He shook the rain from his coat collar and turned up the street, dodging the tide of umbrellas bustling toward him, synthetics enthusiastically on their way to wait in line out front of The Pearl. Muldoon remembered this night like it was yesterday: carrying the kid over his shoulder after Horton's clone met his demise in that alley. Torn apart by mandroids. Left to rot.

Not this time. Things were different now.

*And I didn't even need the BackTracker.*

Muldoon glanced down at his bare wrist. He didn't miss the thing. Greatest understatement of the century. With any luck, he'd never see anything like it again.

Would Cyrus Horton continue fiddling with the fabric of reality? Could he stop himself? Time would tell. The old man's personality had evolved as the timelines twined. His older, future self vanished once his world no longer existed, and the version of Horton that had lived on The Pearl's side of things ended up merging with the manic Underground genius of The Pit's reality. Still eccentric? Oh yeah. And still a recluse. But Irena received messages from him every so often—letters circled in priceless books from his secret library. Horton was living off the grid, outside the Provinces, now that the Underground no longer existed, and he liked being left alone. He described his post-apocalyptic scenery and crazy encounters with drifters in great detail, but he never shared what projects he was working on, if any. Every message ended with him asking about Irena's work and whether her husband was worthy of her.

Easy answer: he was working on it.

With half a grin, Muldoon stuffed his hand back into the pocket of his coat and forged ahead through the driving rain. He headed home to his wife and the dinner she had waiting. It was her turn tonight, and Irena had promised lasagna—his favorite, the way she made it. And they'd be having some company: Allie, that little girl with the bouncing ball. One of Irena's clients for the past few years.

Therapy had helped ease the girl out of her isolation, once she was remanded to Social Services, and now she attended a private secondary school sponsored by the local Wayist temple. Living on-campus with plenty of other Link orphans while their parents went through rehabilitation. Nothing online for Allie; she preferred face-to-face, flesh-and-blood interactions. Her time with Irena had done wonders for her self-esteem, her self-image. Sure, she was clean and well-groomed now, but what mattered more was what went on behind her eyes. Life sparkled in them.

Irena had that effect on people. Muldoon could vouch for it firsthand.

He quickened his pace, humming a tune he'd heard recently on the Link. Something with accordions, about pizza and a full moon. He'd searched for it just in case he felt the need to break into song over dinner. Lately, he never knew when the mood might strike. He'd become unpredictable that way.

Tomorrow, Harold Muldoon, private investigator, the last of his kind in NewCity, would return to his office in the Hancock Building—twelfth floor, eighth door down. Jeannie would greet him in her customary manner, with that familiar tone of borderline irony, as though she was completely cognizant of the fact she knew more than he ever would about everything there was to know. She just liked to let him think he was able to solve cases on his own. She never came right out and said it, but he could hear it in her voice. And he adored her for it—as much as he could adore an office AI assistant.

She would direct his attention toward something that had appeared on the floor in a corner of the office in the wee hours of the morning.

A black plastic wristwatch.

And Muldoon would crush it underfoot without a second thought.

## About the Author

**Milo James Fowler** is the author of *Captain Quasar*, *Spirits of the Earth*, *BackTracker*, *The Interdimensionals*, *Those Who Wait*, *Westward Tally Ho*, *Coyote Cal*, *Vic Boyo*, *Dahlia & Brawnstone*, *Mercer the Soul Smuggler*, *Roadkill Joe*, and a whole lot more. His shorter fiction has appeared in *AE SciFi*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Cosmos*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Nature*. Some readers seem to enjoy his brand of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and humor — available wherever books are sold.

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